The Voice of China: Interactive Television and Participatory Audiences in Mainland China

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
University of East Anglia
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March 2017

Abstract

In 2012, the most popular reality TV show in China was *The Voice of China* (*TVoC*). It is an adaptation of *The Voice of Holland,* the format of which has been traded to many countries. Unlike its international versions, audiences cannot vote in *TVoC* due to government regulations. This research focuses on audience engagement with *TVoC* (2012), in light of this crucial difference. To investigate how audiences engage and make meanings with the show, this thesis is the first study approaches audience engagement in China by examining the tensions between government media policies, industry strategies and audience reception. Building on existing literature on media convergence and participatory culture in the West, this thesis argues that Internet technologies alongside social media enable and stimulate individual critical thinking and creativities which resist structural constraints such as censorship and commercialisation. Although direct online political participation is censored in China, audiences express and negotiate power as ways to construct political values. These online engagements bring new perspectives to understand participatory culture and 'empowerment' of audiences. Using political economy frameworks, this thesis highlights the power of government media policies in shaping TV industry and media content. Analysis of how the industry interprets and implements policies demonstrates how production companies use social media in attracting and cultivating audiences as part of promotional strategies. Adopting a historical reception approach with online ethnography, this study analyses how Chinese audiences engage with *TVoC* differently on two social media platforms: Sina Weibo and Baidu Tieba. It finds the active engagement of Chinese audiences/fans can be read as grassroots resistance, which can be achieved through different practices through different platforms. The multiple-level analysis of this research provides a new and comprehensive approach to the transformational nature of online participatory culture with regard to reality television in non-Western contexts.

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations

Acknowledgements

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Project overview

This research project investigates online participatory culture in mainland China. In order to investigate a cultural phenomenon of this type, the study focuses on the relationships between the importation of foreign television content by China's television industry, Chinese government control of media content and Chinese audiences' engagement through social media. This study into online participatory culture in China is important because within the world of media China is the biggest emerging market, having both the largest television audiences and the largest Internet population. By the end of 2012, China had nearly 1.9 billion regular cable television viewers, including 1 billion digital television viewers, making the Chinese television audience the largest in the world (People's Daily, 2013). According to a governmental report released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CINIC), in 2012 there were 564 million online users in China and this number continues to increase each year. This rapidly growing and transforming media landscape has attracted much academic interest and attention.

This study also offers crucial insights into, and understanding of, the dialogues which exist between and within media cultures around the world, as well as the process of localisation, and the interactions between the television industry, government control and audience engagement in China. In China's media market, the television industry has undergone a transformation as television, under the influence of media globalisation, has became both transmedia and transnational in character. International television formats and content flow into China, which inevitably influences the Chinese media market and shapes online participatory culture in China.

Television programmes are the most popular topics of conversation on social media in China. However, Chinese audiences struggle with how freely

they can access media content and express and exchange their opinions, because media content and production are strictly controlled by the government. As Ma (2000) points out, China has a different political-economic situation to the liberal democracies found in many Western countries, in that the Chinese state continues to play a constitutive role in media dynamics. The role the state plays in television will be discussed in the next section through a brief review of the history of television in China. It is not the aim of this study to discuss how liberal (or not) the state has become in regard to the 'liberating force' of the market. In acknowledging that the state's control over media is not weakening, this research looks at a micro level into how government control (policies and regulations) has shaped the television industry, television content and online participatory culture in China.

Within such contexts, this thesis therefore looks at a specific case, the first season of *TVoC,* which was screened in 2012. *TVoC* is a transnational-format reality television programme, localised with Chinese media content. This particular show has been chosen for this study not only because of its commercial success and popularity in China, but also because of the significant social-political factors which surround it. *TVoC* is a typical and successful case of the television industry using official pages on social networking sites as key platforms and methods for attracting bigger audiences, by offering interactive and participatory opportunities.

Under the theoretical framework of participatory culture study developed by Western academics, this study attempts to construct a relatively comprehensive way of looking not just at audiences, but also at broader social-political factors such as the social conflicts and contradictions embedded within Chinese society, and issues around contemporary Chinese social media that distinguish it from others within the world media markets. As a whole, these factors – industry and government – have influenced the way audiences engage with *TVoC* (2012). Thus, the main question this research asks is: how do Chinese audiences engage with *TVoC* (2012) via social media, under the

influences of government control over media content and industrial manipulation.

In order to think about how audiences engage with *TVoC* and make meanings for reality television programmes, this thesis is the first study that approaches audience engagement in China through examining the tensions between government media policies, industry strategies and audience reception. Building on the existing literature of participatory culture in the West, this thesis argues that Internet social media technologies enable and stimulate important individual critical thinking and creativities which overcome structural constraints such as censorship and commercialisation. Although no direct political participation is allowed within China's cyberspace, Chinese audiences express and negotiate power in their own ways, and these activities will help to construct political value in China.

In very recent years there have been an increasing number of studies into the Chinese television industry and the country's media policies (Keane, 2015; Zhao, 2007; Zhang, 2009; Chan, 2003). Nevertheless, qualitative studies of Chinese audiences are still very limited in the methodologies and theories applied, largely because the history of audience research in China is only just over 30 years old. According to Zhou Baohua's (2006) study of audience research trends in mainland China, most Chinese scholars have employed Western theories to study Chinese audiences and have mostly followed structural and behaviourist traditions. These particular approaches mean that audience composition, media use and media effects have received the most attention in studies of Chinese media; literary criticism, cultural studies and reception analysis are often neglected in Chinese audience studies (Zhou, 2006; Keane, 2015).

It is worth mentioning that the situation regarding audience research conducted outside China shows a positive upward trend. Young Chinese scholars studying abroad have begun to study Chinese audiences by adopting methods from cultural studies and reception analysis (Meng, 2009; Shen, 2014;

3

Wang, 2013; Guan, 2008; Lei, 2008). Using audience reception approaches will help to achieve an intricate and in-depth understanding of audiences' participations and responses to television programmes, leading to improved understanding of meanings, motivations, feelings and experiences.

Like these scholars, this thesis focuses on Chinese audiences who are active viewers using television selectively to gratify their desires and needs, and who actively engage in online participations to make different meanings of television programmes, or to negotiate power and agency in online communities. This group of Chinese audiences are perceived as having traits of resistance, independence and critical thinking, and exhibiting themselves as talented individuals who seek self-expression and want to achieve higher social status (Huang and Yip, 2012).

By adopting these notions of audience, this thesis suggests that Chinese television audiences should be examined through a more comprehensive consideration of issues such as the shifting media landscape, globalisation and transnational cultural flows, the increasing influence of social media, and the strict media policies and political environment in China. To be more specific, it seeks to analyse the relationships between the importation of foreign television content by China's television industry, the Chinese government's control of media content and Chinese audience reception.

In particular, this project uses the reality television show *TVoC* (2012) as a case study through which audiences' online participations and interactivities can be explored. Launched in July 2012, the reality television show *TVoC* adopted a successful television format acquired from the Dutch entertainment company, Talpa. It was an unexpected success and quickly became extremely popular in China. Local news reported the show as a phenomenon, with contestants becoming new national idols and with almost every episode dominating online discussions for several days after airing. In the current environment, trending topics on social media receive great attention both from the industry and government. The use of social media has been on

the rise in mainland China, with audiences being afforded increasing opportunities to engage with foreign cultural products and consequently talking about these foreign media products on social media in ever-increasing numbers. Sina Weibo, a Twitter-like social media entity, is the most popular platform in China, with 503 million registered users at the end of 2012 (Sina Weibo report, 2012).

The success of *TVoC* (2012), produced by the Shanghai-based Canxing Production, has inspired and encouraged the TV industry to import more foreign TV formats. It can be said the reality television production landscape in China has changed dramatically since 2012. The concepts of 'format', 'license', and 'copyright' have also been developed in mainland China since then. Both the TV industry and Chinese scholars believe that television formats from abroad are the key to success and 'successful TV formats offer the chance for domestic TV networks to achieve good audience ratings with lower costs and risk'. Illustrating this trend, the number of reality television shows in China with imported TV formats had risen to 30 by 2013.

A major consequence of this success has been attempts to curtail and control the over-saturated market. The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People's Republic of China SAPPRFT), formerly known as the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT), is an executive organisation under the direct supervision of the State Council of the People's Republic of China. As China's major media regulator and censor, it is well known for its strict regulations and policies over the country's radio, television and film industry. SAPPRFT's regulations have impacted on the way audiences are allowed to engage with reality shows, and the most obvious example of this is the ban on audiences voting to decide the outcome of reality shows like *TVoC*. This means that audiences' engagements with, and resistance to, these controls has been pushed into online spaces in which audience members can discuss, more or less freely, the content of the shows.

In the past, Chinese audiences were allowed to vote for their favourite contestants in reality shows and had the power to decide the final results of the competitions. The Chinese reality television show inspired by the British reality competition, *Pop Idol*, *Super Girls* (2004–2006), is usually perceived as the most influential show of this type within mainland China and is the most well known outside its national context, particularly within Western countries (Liu, 2006; Meng, 2009). There are several studies of Chinese reality television which have used *Super Girls* (2004) and its follow-up programme as case studies for exploring reality television and its audiences in China (Meng, 2009; Huang, 2014). From a positive standpoint, Meng (2009) argued that reality television in China has empowered Chinese audiences because it has provided a platform for them to practice democratic deliberation and governance in an authoritarian society. Huang Yu (2014) examined the *Super Girls* (2004–2006) phenomenon as representative of how Chinese youth have started to strive for autonomy by negotiating an influx of ideologies, thus shaping Chinese popular culture.

However, Huang also concluded that the state interventions and crucial restrictions on reality television since *Super Girl* (2004) have brought talent show fever to an end. Huang's observation of the state's restrictions on reality talent shows demonstrates the strength of the Chinese government in influencing the television industry in order to pursue policies of relieving social tensions and promoting the depoliticised rhetoric of a harmonious society. Does the return of talent show 'fever' in 2012 mean that the state has loosened its control and regulation over reality television shows? The role of such state control over media content will be analysed in the next section, alongside a brief review of the history of Chinese television.

Through interventions into the ways Chinese television audiences engage with and resist *TVoC* (2012) on social media, this thesis suggests that Chinese audiences are sandwiched between industry pursuit of profit and the state's political regulation of media content. Nevertheless, Chinese audiences

seem not get lost in the mass entertainment. They use social media for self-expression and as a tool for seeking discursive power to resist the dominant propaganda ideologies embedded in the programme content. Chinese audiences display different engagement and expressions on Sina Weibo (the official space for *TVoC*) and Baidu Tieba (the unofficial fan community). Although the ways and forms of audience engagement are different on these two platforms, both demonstrate various similar strategic resistances to the consumerist television industry and the dominant ideologies of contemporary mainland China.

This chapter will first set out the context of the study, by briefly introducing the history of television in mainland China, the reality television industry in China, and issues and debates around the success of *TVoC* (2012). Following this, it briefly introduces the theoretical frameworks of this thesis, as well as its major media and cultural research contexts and chapter breakdowns.

1.2 Cultural research context

1.2.1 The history of television in mainland China

Building on other scholars' work, this thesis briefly reviews television history in mainland China in regard to both television institutions and programme content. According to Huang and Zhou's observations (2003) the institutional development of television in China can be broken down into three stages. These authors describe the first period as spanning from 1958 to the early 1980s, during which time the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), specifically the Party's propaganda department, dominated a 'completely administrative monopoly' role in controlling media content. The second stage lasted from the early 1980s to the mid 1990s, a period during which the television industry was allowed to coexistence in an environment containing both the CCP's 'administrative monopoly' and 'relatively free market competition'. From the mid 1990s until the present day, the Chinese television industry has evolved from being an 'administrative monopoly' to a 'relatively free market competition' position.

That is to say, although still guided by the CCP, the Chinese television industry has now become more market-economy oriented. From the aspect of television content production, China's television history can again be divided into three stages: 'propaganda', 'works' and 'products' (Zhou, 2010).

Television broadcasting in China started in 1958. The first television station established was Beijing Television, followed by two more stations, Shanghai Television and Harbin Television, which were sequentially launched later in the same year. Television was developed as a political tool and propaganda instrument that served the CCP in imposing ideological hegemony on society, originally under Chairman Mao Zedong's ideas and rulings (Hong, 1998). In other words, Chinese television, both institutionally and ideologically, was incorporated into the CCP's pre-existing media system as a propaganda mouthpiece. During that time, the national broadcasting system was categorised into 'two tiers' – national and provincial. The system was built with a hierarchy that was compatible with the CCP's political administration, so that central directives could be easily delivered to local stations.

This period is what Zhou named the 'propaganda-led' stage. During this stage there were only a few channels available to watch and television content was a scarce resource. The production, broadcasting and distribution of television content was limited, as well as the number of TV sets available to the population on which such content could be viewed. Chinese television audiences were considered to be in a position of passive acceptance of propaganda content, while the CCP played a completely 'administrative monopoly' role in controlling and regulating the television system and its content. For instance, according to Chinese scholars Zhao Yuezhi and Guo Zhenzhi's observations, television content was limited to 'feature stories about communist role models', and 'educational shows' (2007: p. 522). During the Cultural Revolution (1966–67), television in Shanghai became to 'an instrument of factional political struggles' in the political movement (Zhao and Guo, 2007: p. 523). Although the national television audience was extremely

small at this time (Guo, 1991), television in China was already being used as a political mobilisation and propaganda instrument for the CCP's political ends.

Since 1983, China's television sector has undergone rapid transformation and commercialisation. In particular, the period from 1983 to 1988 was the fastest growing period for China's television industry, with the average annual increase in the number of television stations being around 30%. Such rapid development was closely associated with China's new political policies. In March 1983, at the 11th conference of national radio and television workers, the party state expanded the two-tier (national and provincial) television system into a four-tier (national, provincial, municipal and county networks) structure. These four tiers stood independently from one another, and comprised 15 provincial, 300 to 400 municipal and 3,000 county-level cable networks to date (Zhang, 2009). The four-tier structure enabled local governments to establish TV stations without additional costs to central government and to operate one television station within each local administrative area.

During this stage, the number of television sets and television broadcasting institutions increased dramatically, as well as the content and genres of television being enriched and professionalised. In this stage, characterised by Zhou (2010) as 'works-led', watching television became an ordinary, normal behaviour for the Chinese population. Zhou describes Chinese television audiences during this stage as 'spectators' who take an active role in the viewing process by pursuing more programmes and richer genres of television content, as well as seeking better-quality television sets and content.

From a positive perspective this new policy, which led to rapid development of national television infrastructure, allowed more Chinese audiences access to television. However, at the same time it also greatly strengthened the control of the party state because 'television stations within the same administrative areas merged into one' (Zhang, 2009: p. 11). A great number of county-level television stations were transformed into relay stations

that only broadcast programmes from China Central Television (CCTV). Through this structure the state-owned television stations assumed the dominant position in programme production and transmission in China. Categorised as 'national' television, CCTV played an important role in censorship and in tighter control over other 'local' channels.

While the four-tier monopoly structure ensured the rapid popularisation of television in the country, it also intensified the CCP's central control in the commercialisation reform of the country's media systems. The Chinese television industry was thereby shaped into a unique form of state monopoly capitalism; as Zhao and Guo (2007: p. 527) summarise: 'commercialised operations organised into a hierarchical structure of administrative monopoly.' The outcome of the four-tier structure was that the Chinese government's intention to control national television and broadcasting systems did not loosen and television became an even more centralised aspect of state power.

The 'administrative monopoly' also impacted on private producers and foreign broadcasters. Market-oriented reforms opened up the sphere of TV production to private producers, and private ownership and more competition in the Chinese television industry from foreign broadcasters has been gradually granted permission since the 1980s. From 1993 to 2002, 29 overseas satellite TV channels were allowed to enter mainland China, from countries including, among others, the United States, United Kingdom, Japan, Hong Kong and Macao. Overseas TV news, entertainment, and integration channels were allowed to be broadcast in some pre-selected hotels, restaurants and special communities in mainland China. Nevertheless, strict regulations on media content limited the activities of private producers and companies, placing them in a vulnerable position, as topics, narratives and even ideological guidance consequently became subject to political influence from the CCP.

During the 1980s and the 1990s, television stations were primarily dependent on government financial support that goes to major television stations. Most of television stations were heavily reliant on corresponding

television stations' revenues for their maintenance and development, requiring that television stations' productions should be consistent with officials' instructions and regulations, rather than following the demands of a market economy. Moreover, mechanisms of regulatory control, such as a licensing and permit system and ad hoc administrative orders, allowed the state to retain strategic control over media content and enabled state media organisations to secure their profits and status. The term 'administrative monopoly' implies that the overall structure of the Chinese television industry was tightly controlled by the Party's propaganda department as well as other key media regulatory authorities, such as the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), General Administration of Press and Publishing (GAPP), Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), Ministry of Culture (MOC) and Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM).

However, in terms of operational, administrative, and regulatory control of the country's broadcasting industry, SAPPRFT, as an executive branch directly reporting to the State Council, held the direct power in developing and enforcing all rules and regulations for the television, radio and film industry. It was mainly responsible for:

- Approving the content of radio and TV programmes and films, overseeing film imports and stipulating the proportion of time allotted for foreign TV programmes so that they are in accordance with the requirements of the CCP Propaganda Department.
- Overseeing the operation of China Central Television (CCTV), the national TV network; approving the establishment of cable channels and the installation of head-ends in cable networks.
- Controlling access to satellite and cable networks as well as supervising their operations.

These functions and responsibilities clearly demonstrate SAPPRFT's power to monitor, censor and regulate television content in order to meet the CCP's political interests and values. The regulatory power of SAPPRFT has remained

a great influence on Chinese media until the present day and its operations and influence will be analysed in detail in the first chapter of this thesis.

After 15 years of negotiations, China jointed the World Trade Organization (WTO) in December 2001. The advancement of globalisation has motivated the rise of economic liberalisation and deregulation in many countries and spheres, but this process differs in China because the Communist Party plays a central role in China's media globalisation process (Zhang, 2009). Since the mid 1990s, the Chinese television industry has undergone a remarkable transformation, evolving from a propaganda instrument of the Communist Party into a market-oriented mass medium within the country's evolving market authoritarian system.

Taking China's accession into the WTO as a key point, the Chinese television industry was affected by the penetration of external forces and the international rules (trade and investment liberalisation under the WTO) which caused issues relating to 'opening the internal and external market'. As Professor Michael Keane states, China's accession to the WTO has been widely considered as a crisis for the once-stable and heavily monopolised broadcasting system in China (Keane, 2007). In the past, the CCP used SAPPRFT to prevent international media conglomerates from entering into the national market and foreign 'media giants' from sharing the market between themselves (Lee, 2003: p.16).

However, in order to develop intensified commercialisation as well as dealing with possible challenges from international media groups, the Chinese government had to adopt a series of market-oriented reform measures to make this adjustment possible. Chinese scholars later on summarised these policies during the reforms as 'four separations, three consolidations, and one alteration' to describe the integration and restructuring of the television and broadcasting system (Huang and Zhou, 2013: p, 31). Huang and Zhou explain that the 'four separations' refer to cable TV separating into cable networks and television stations; the separation of TV programme production and broadcasting

(STVPB); separately managing news channels from sports, entertainment, movie and other channels; and the separation of general news coverage and political propaganda.

The 'three consolidations' were the combining of cable television stations and broadcast television stations, the combining of television stations and radio stations, and a wide-ranging restructuring including the merging of radio, television and cable companies into larger media conglomerates. As a result, the number of consolidated broadcasting groups rapidly increased from none to 18, with one at central level, 11 at provincial level and six at city level, as detailed by Liu (2007). The 'one alteration' policy refers to a functional change to municipal and county television stations. These television stations became responsible for retransmitting television programmes produced by national and provincial television stations. Furthermore, only the provincial administration department of SAPPRFT could provide television drama and movies to municipal and county television stations.

Huang and Zhou (2003) also state that the development of the 'four-tier' television monopoly structure has led to the development of a large number of television stations, but that these are of small scale and low economic efficiency. Clearly, these new media policies and modifications have been applied as resolutions to the drawbacks caused by the 'four-tier' television monopoly structure. More importantly, these new policies were put in place to enable Chinese television to survive in the domestic market-oriented reform environment, and in recognition of global expectations after China's accession to the WTO. During this transitional period, the post-WTO era, some studies have demonstrated (Zhao, 2008; Lee *et al.*, 2008; Fung, 2008) that new media policies softened control of explicit propaganda messages. However, when, in its struggle between the market and state interests, the CCP attempts to achieve marketisation and commercialisation 'the ideological function of television remains the foremost priority' as Xu Minghua stated in 2013.

1.2.2 Recent policy changes

In relation to this thesis, the new television policy of 'separation of TV programme production and broadcasting (STVPB)' will be addressed and analysed alongside the reform process. This policy is very important for our understanding of the current Chinese television industry and the media market. The STVPB policy is very similar to the UK's commission. The reason this policy is addressed at this point is because it is a significant step in the transformation process of television stations in China.

The STVPB is an important market-oriented reform measurement for the Chinese television system, as Xu (2013) states. It refers to the separation of television production and broadcasting in the traditional television system, transferring the permission for producing television programmes from state-owned TV stations to independent television production companies. It means state-owned TV stations have become mainly responsible for purchasing television programmes from independent production companies, except for those providing news and sports content. Over the last twenty years, with the increasing popularity of digital television, Chinese audiences' demand for television programmes has also grown (Xu, 2013). In these circumstances, the traditional broadcasting system was unable to meet the needs of Chinese audiences or the fast changeover of the industry to a market economy.

As a consequence of these changes both audiences and the Chinese television industry wanted to implement the STVPB as soon as possible. This particular policy enables China to open up opportunities for independent production companies and allows for the penetration into the country of the global trade in cultural products. Although this policy was long been discussed in China, its actual execution and implementation process is as slow as the reforming process of China's broadcasting systems and mechanisms. Some scholars point out that the obstruction in implementation of the STVPB is rooted in the interdependent relationship between production companies and broadcasters (Zhao, 2008; Huang and Zhou, 2003). The situation for

independent production companies that sit outside the national television system is more difficult to survive. Television stations, in their status as broadcasters, have restrained the production companies. Independent production companies cannot produce any news programmes without an official news report authority, and cannot buy any rights for transmitting sport events. They also cannot import any programmes from overseas without the cooperation of television stations.

Moreover, private ownership of television channels is prohibited in China; broadcasters such as CCTV remain the official outlet for all private productions. Ye Lin (2013) explains that the usual way in which independent production companies and broadcasters work together in China is for the production company to handle the entire production process from scratch and for the broadcaster to simply make a decision about whether to broadcast after viewing the final product. Based on the estimated advertising revenue and potential viewer ratings, broadcasters (the TV networks) then have the authority to determine how much they will pay for the programmes. For the production company, profits come from these direct sales to the TV channels, and are likely to be fixed at quite low levels with no opportunity to benefit from additional revenue from runaway hit shows, as they would in the USA or UK (Ye, 2013). It can be seen that this kind of cooperation model can force the production company to skimp on production expenses at the cost of programme quality, in order to maximise profits from their fixed revenue on the sale of the product to the broadcaster. In consequence the quality of TV programmes may have been negatively influenced.

In 2012, however, the reality television show *TVoC,* produced by Canxing Production (a production company under the Star Media group), and broadcast by the Zhejiang provincial television station, was widely seen as the most successful execution of the STVPB in mainland China (ChinaNews, 2012). Adopting a successful global television format from Netherlands-based company Talpa, *TVoC* became an unexpected success and according to

15

Nielsen-CC data (China Real Time Reports, 2016) since debuting in 2012 it is one of the highest-rated television programmes in China. Local news reported the show as a 'phenomenal programme', the contestants became new national idols and almost every episode dominated the following days of online discussions when aired. The imported television format of *TVoC* has been seen as the key factor for the success of the show (Wang, 2013; Yu, 2012).

Besides the adoption of a successful television format, the new way of organising the collaboration between the production company (Canxing Production) and the regional television station has contributed greatly to the show's success. The increasing popularity of the show generated higher advertising revenue and profit that was shared between the production company and the broadcaster, in contrast to the fixed sale payment model detailed above. The joint investment, shared risk and profit arrangement set up between Canxing Production and Zhejiang Satellite Television together ensured the quality of *TVoC*, and led them prioritising audiences' interests. It can be argued that the shifting business model between production companies and satellite television stations reflects the intrinsic meaning of the STVPB policy, as the state and the industry expected. Consequently, the success of *TVoC* has inspired and encouraged the television industry to import more foreign television formats. The reality television production landscape in China has, as a consequence, changed dramatically since 2012, and the concepts of 'format', 'license', and 'copyright' have also been developed.

Nevertheless, the Chinese state's control over the television market has not loosened, even under the situation achieved by the implementation of the 'STVPB', which was supposed to be a significant symbol of successful marketisation. Recent examples have showed that the state's policies remain as powerful and influential as ever over the Chinese television industry. The state has continued to exercise strict control over market access as well as regulating television content and release, and reality television shows adopting foreign formats have drawn attention from the state media regulator. In particular, in

16

2013 SAPPRFT limited the number and airtime of shows based on foreign formats.

From 1958 to the present day, China's television system and television industry have undergone significant development and huge transformations. But the role the state plays in Chinese television remains central and powerful. Its media policies and its ideological guiding direction largely determine the scope and shape of the Chinese television industry. The next section will demonstrated the cultural context of reality television and its audiences in mainland China.

1.2.3 Reality TV in China: under state control

In developing an understanding of reality television in China, this section shows the evolution of reality television through briefly reviewing the differences between *Super Girl* and *TVoC* (2012). Chinese reality television has witnessed a rise in popularity since 2000, at almost the same time as reality game shows such as *Big Brother* and *Survivor* became extremely popular in Western countries (particularly the UK and the US) (Yang, 2014, p, 518). In particular, China's accession to the WTO in 2001 led to an increase in the frequency of international communication and cooperation between China and the wider world, and this allowed Chinese television programme makers to catch with global television trends (Luo, 2010) and popularity. Benefiting from this globalisation process, the television industry in China has experienced a transformation in marketisation, diversification, and entertainmentisation since its joining of the WTO.

The development of reality television in China can be generally divided into three stages: the rise of reality television (2000–2004), the first wave (2004–2012), and the second wave (2012–present). The first wave in China's reality television development is widely known as the *Super Girl* (Hunan TV, 2005), followed by *TVoC* (Zhejiang TV) as the second wave. The focus of this thesis is the current landscape of China's reality television; nevertheless, the

history of the evolution and development from Super Girl in 2004, inevitably and significantly needs to be addressed, explored and demonstrated here.

According to Michael Keane (2013), the term 'reality television' (*zhenren xiu*) entered into the Chinese media industry lexicon in 2002. The English term 'reality television' is translated into Chinese as *zhenren xiu* (real people shows). This Chinese translation, although widely used to refer to reality television in China, does not reflect the complexity of the discussions of the term 'reality television' in Western studies. It does not simply means a reflection of reality, but should be understood as being inextricably enmeshed with the concept of generic hybridity in reality television, 'its relationship with the history and status of the documentary form, and issues of theoretical, critical and methodological approach involved in this field', as Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn (2004, p, 2) suggest. The debates about the genre of reality television will be further reviewed and discussed in the following section in looking at the media research context.

In general, reality television in China is understood first and foremost as entertaining programming in which real people display their individuality and abilities to the viewing public (Yang, 2014). The popularity of reality television has exceeded that of fictional drama serials, according to Zhu (2008), and it has 'claimed center stage, shifting the attention of Chinese audiences and policy makers, and also of China watchers in the West, away from serial drama' (p, 141). With this in mind, this section will review the rise of reality television in mainland China. From the hit talent show *Super Girl's* phenomenal nationwide success 2004–2006, reality television as a new genre of television programmes became popular in China and was eventually welcomed by Chinese audiences in their millions. Launched by the Hunan Provincial Television Station (HNTV) in 2004, *Super Girl* achieved huge success and prominence in 2005 (Li and Lee, 2010), with an estimated audience of 200 million (Cai and Xie, 2006).

As a result of its success of some Chinese commentators reported, *Super Girl* has being the first wave of reality television in mainland China. With

regard to the show, there are numerous discussions focused on its possible social, cultural, and political significance, and even on its gender identity implications for China (Jian and Liu, 2009; Li and Lee, 2010; Meng, 2009; Keane *et al*., 2007). Furthermore, some researchers have addressed the possible implications of audience voting in *Super Girl* on the political culture of the nation (McCartney, 2005; Nan, 2005).

Super Girl (2004–2006) as most popular reality talent show, is fairly similar to in its impacts to *American Idol,* in the sense that it created new forms of media commodities as well as new forms of fan labour. Chinese scholars Jian Miaoju and Liu Chang-de (2009) describe the economic development of reality television in China through analysing both the production and consumption of *Super Girl. N*ew communication technology developments enable and enhance the possibilities for audience engagement with reality television. Here the audience engagement, in Jian and Liu (2009)'s observation, are the volunteer and unpaid labour that was created in the promoting process of *Super Girl*, which also shows how the organisers steered and manipulated audience participation. Their analysis demonstrates that the entertainment industry was able to generate profits in China's growing television and music markets, as they benefit from those new forms of unpaid labour.

In this period, the volunteer and unpaid labour work of audience participation, as Jian and Liu (2009) discussed, mainly refers to the voting system within the *Super Girl* narrative. Chinese audiences were offered opportunities to vote for their favourite 'super girls', not just simply to watch the show. This made *Super Girl* become not only the most commercial and successful reality television in China, but also the one considered as being the most democratic (Yang, 2014). Yang explains that the paid voting system of *Super Girl* enhanced the pleasure and stakes of fan participation, and constituted a form of economic exploitation of fan emotion and fan labour. In a way it allowed fans to exploit the genuine voting opportunity to 'create a vibrant civic space where they can form new alliances, perform fan activism,

and articulate alternative values and visions' (Yang, 2014, p, 518). Previous studies have mainly addressed the paid voting system with regard to the active connections made between audiences and television programmes.

In addressing the voting system, some Chinese scholars emphasised the rising power of Chinese audiences while they were actively involved and interacting with *Super Girl* (Li and Lee, 2009; Jian and Liu, 2009; Meng, 2009). These arguments and studies are seen from positive aspects and from more Western-centric ideologies. For instance, Li and Lee (2009) suggest there is a transformation of power relationships between the media and the audience. When Chinese audiences can vote with reality television, the Chinese television industry, in Jian and Liu (2009)'s view, is promoting concepts and ideas about 'democratising television' and 'being yourself' to its audiences, and this transforms audiences engagement into a new form of unpaid labour at the symbolic level. In addition, scholar Wu (2011) sees *Super Girl*'s invitation to audience voting as 'a provocative and revolutionary step' with tremendous political implications (p. 53) because China's political system has no direct election of government officials.

From a different aspect, scholar Meng Bingchun (2009) examines the 2005 *Super Girl* phenomenon in China through the lens of media spectacle. She suggests that within the context of the changes in China's broadcasting policies and the process of media marketisation, the *Super Girl* spectacle set a milestone for Chinese television production with regard to fully exploiting the commercial value of a single programme across different platforms (Meng, 2009). Indeed, the global transnational media conglomerates have long been developing a wide range of strategies aiming to exploit the commercial value of cultural artefacts and products. But the participatory forms that the industry offers may vary though time, and alter to apply to different media and national contexts. In the *Super Girl* era (2004–2006), industry focused on and used the paid voting system to attract audiences and fans' discursive and affective engagement with the show.

However, in 2007 China's broadcasting regulation administration, SAPPRFT, issued a list of restrictions relating to reality programmes in which all forms of audience voting (including short message service via mobile phone, telephone and Internet votes) were banned in television programmes (Yang, 2014). Thus, as people cannot vote in the era of *TVoC* (201–present), the participatory forms of reality television have shifted to the use of social media. In terms of industry promotional strategies, it is the use of social media by production companies that performs similar functions and roles to public voting in the *Super Girl* era.

Over the last decade, the Chinese government, particularly via SAPPRFT's regulations and controls over reality shows, has become increasingly strict, bringing in content censorship, broadcasting time limits, and controls over the forms of audience participation. Regulations on television content in China are mainly about sex, homosexuality, privacy, gambling, extraordinary competition and low taste. These regulations consequently influenced the format of *The Voice* when it came to China, and this influence will be further explained and explored in the first chapter of this thesis.

In 2012, the nationwide success of *TVoC* set off the second wave of reality talent shows in China (Wang, 2013). For instance, *TVoC* (2012) rated number one in China's network prime time with 120 million viewers, 400 million Internet users, and an achieved estimated ¥300 million generated in advertising revenue. The popularity and success of *TVoC (2012)* is one reason it was chosen as the case study for this research. More importantly, it was chosen because the show has had an enormous influence on the Chinese television industry and music industry. Chinese scholars (Yu, 2013; Li, 2012; Xu, 2012; Zheng, 2013; Wu, 2014) quickly launched explorations and discussions about the reasons for such success, as related to *TVoC (2012)* and beyond. Although they took different approaches in their analysis, they addressed a number of common points: imported foreign television formats, the format localisation process, the implementation of STVPB policy, the role of social media in

reality television, media convergence in China, and the future of China's television industry.

Nevertheless, what is left out of their research and discussions is Chinese audiences' reception of *TVoC (2012)*, and this is an area yet to be researched. Therefore, this thesis tries to build upon their research, but it also brings in Western theories and methods of audience reception studies to develop understanding. In particular this thesis believes that investigation of the triangular relationships between government media policies, the television industry and Chinese audiences would provide a more comprehensive view and understanding of the cultural phenomenon generated in China by *TVoC* in 2012.

The transformation of reality television in China has close links to the Chinese government's policies and politics. Through this review, the importance of China's accession to the WTO, which brought global influence to China's media market and television industry transformation, can be investigated. Globalisation as a strategy can indeed appeal to transnational audiences and increase global culture flows, but only under the assumption that the format and content does not contain elements that seriously contradict with local cultural values and practices (Wang, 2009), or political regulations. From this review, it can be seen that various restrictions on and policies towards television programmes from SAPPRFT had direct impact on both the content of reality television programmes and on the television industry in China as a whole.

The next section will focus on the media research contexts, looking into issues and debates around reality television studies addressing the reality television format, and on online censorship in China. It is important to look at both Western and Chinese scholars' research outcomes, in order to understand *TVoC* (2012) as a transnational cultural-flow phenomenon and the product of globalisation. In this thesis, 'Western scholars' mostly refers to those who are not based in mainland China, but they are not necessarily all from the West.

'Chinese academics' refers to those who are based in mainland China and write in the Chinese language.

1.3 Media research context

1.3.1 Reality television studies

While the reality television phenomenon took off in Western countries during 1999–2000 (Hill, 2005), its development was relatively slower in mainland China. However, since 2012, China's consumption of reality television has been on the rise, but, in line with indications by Luo (2010) just prior to this increase, the development of reality television in mainland China continues to be addressed rarely in Western commentaries and academic writing. Thus the academic studies of Chinese reality television production are perceived as lacking in substantial research.

Nevertheless, in Western academia, reality television has been studied for a long time and through various perspectives. Some of the writing on recent reality television discusses issues relating to the genre's history, generic classification, economic origins and cultural/political meaning. Even in Western research, there is no single simple definition of reality television programming. It is a hybrid television genre that can be associated with anything and everything (Hill, 2005), or, as Kilborn describes it, 'something of a catch-all phrase' (1994: pp. 423), or 'popular factual programming' (Corner, 2001).

Murray and Ouellette's book *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (2004) and Holmes and Jermyn's *Understanding Reality Television* (2004) established cornerstone studies of current reality television. In her book *Reality TV: audiences and popular factual television*, Annette Hill (2005) provides an overview of how the television industry, television scholars and television audiences discuss and classify reality television. Ouellette and Murray (2004) define reality television as 'the fusion of popular entertainment

with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real' (p. 2). Holmes and Jermyn (2004, p. 2) then suggest that reality television should be understood as inextricably enmeshed with the concept of generic hybridity in reality television, 'its relationship with the history and status of the documentary form, and issues of theoretical, critical and methodological approach involved in this field'.

To better understand reality TV, it is important to highlight the differences between reality TV in China and mainstream Western reality TV. First, the Chinese translation of 'reality television show' is '真人秀节目 (*Zhen Ren Xiu Jie Mu*)' the literal means of which is 'real people shows'. This meaning focuses more on the 'people' who participate in such shows rather than their 'reality'. Yin Hong, professor of Film and Television Studies at Tsinghua University, defines '真人秀节目' as a particular kind of television programme, characterised by the recording and processing of competitive behaviour carried out by voluntary participants in a prescribed scenario in a prescribed situation, in accordance with specific rules and for a given purpose (Yin, 2005). Yin's definition here also emphasises the 'competitive behaviour of voluntary participants'. This suggests that the participation in them of real people is the key to understanding Chinese reality television shows.

Apart from Yin's definition, barely any Chinese scholars have developed this definition. It is also fairly ubiquitous that most Chinese scholars have referenced Western theories and research into reality television to examine the phenomenon in China. However, government interventions in media and culture should be carefully considered here in talking about reality television; as Chris Shei noted, 'in the case of China, culture and politics work together to rule out the possibilities and standardisation of global media' (Shei, 2013: pp. 43). The globalisation of media has accelerated the development of the business of television-format trading in China. However, the existence of deeply rooted cultural differences between the East and West must be considered, as the understanding of one particular television programme genre could be different in two contrasting cultural systems. In terms of both

television format and content, it is necessary to have an understanding of both Western and Eastern media industries. Otherwise, the misunderstanding of cultural products and phenomenon may lead to an overly extreme perception that 'Western reality TV formats have run up against local cultural norms and values' (Turner, 2010, pp. 55).

This thesis is not intended to explore and explain these controversial definitions or the genre of reality television, but will focus on television format. Holmes and Jermyn (2004) see reality television as the type of programmes that have the potential to be referred to in the general and trade press as 'events', 'must-see' or 'watercooler TV' (Holmes and Jermyn, 2004, p. 14). They give examples of this kind of programmes from among those with the highest audience ratings, such as *Big Brother, Survivor, Popstars* (ITV, 2001, 2002–3, UK)*,* and *Pop Idol* (Fremantle/19TV; ITV, 2001–2, UK)*.* This kind of 'must-see' reality show usually comes with global formats. The circulation of 'global formats' is a key factor in the development of reality formats as 'event TV' (Holmes and Jermyn, 2004, p. 12). With its unexpected success in 2012, *TVoC* indeed fits this category. This thesis will discuss how Canxing Production localised foreign television formats, with regard to China's specific production environment, and to wider social-political changes taking place in mainland China. Ultimately, is the format more important than the content of reality television, or not?

In the following sections, the localisation of television formats and online censorship in China will be examined, in order to develop an understanding of the broader context of China's reality television and the industry surrounding it.

1.3.2 TV formats and localisation

According to Albert Moran (2009), the television industry has three different models of internationalisation: licensing of programmes for broadcast elsewhere, international co-production, and adaptation of programme concepts

from one place to another (also known as 'television-format trade'). Television-format trading – the international sale of television programme formats –began to mature into a major business in the 1990s (Moran, 1998), and soon became popular worldwide. Trading of television formats is seen as useful as it has a greater chance of success with domestic audiences (Moran, 1998; Sinclair *et al.*, 1996), because it combines the adoption of an idea that has often been 'proven' elsewhere with the possibility of local production, materials and adaptations.

As reviewed in the television history section of this work, more satellite channels have become available to the Chinese viewer in recent years. Thus domestic competition between provincial broadcasters and the national broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV) is becoming intense. In addition, China's national broadcasting systems do not seem to have sufficiently a strong production industry at their disposal to create all the creative programmes they require. This has driven television programme producers to look elsewhere for new ideas and media content. Most recently, importing popular international television format has become 'trendy' and in high demand among Chinese television producers.

Formerly, reality television and 'infotainment' programming in China were seen as 'easy ways to produce TV that is cheaper and has less risk attached' (Keane and Liu, 2009, pp. 243). But the case of *TVoC (2012)* has changed this situation. In the past, as Keane (2003) observed, reality television gained access to Chinese television media through local producers' imitations of popular Western television formats; they simply produced a copied show based on international versions. However, importing television formats that already succeeded in other countries then caught on very quickly in China because of the huge success of *TVoC* (2012). Reality shows like *TVoC* (2012–2016), *Where are we going, Dad?* (201–2015), *I am a singer* (2013–2016), and *Hurry up, Brother* (2014–2016), not only paid format-trading companies large fees for television formats each year, but these shows also often required larger-

than-ever investments. Consequently, production companies now have to share both the risks and the advertising revenue generated with the broadcasters.

To further discuss and explore this phenomenon in present-day mainland China, we have to first understand the trends in global format trading, know what an international television format is and be aware of the 'localisation' process. For decades, the television formats of 'reality' and 'fiction' programming have been produced and sold in international markets (Moran, 1998). Moran sees the global television-format trade as a global communication process in the form of a comprehensive transfer of know-how that is associated with the format license. In China, television producers call the imported television format the 'bible' (instruction book). This paper-based format includes not only the programme idea, but also the instructions for rules, plots, names, locations etc. (Schmitt, 2005; Gottlieb, 2010) together with the guidelines for production and some postproduction skills (Yin, 2005).

Television scholars have viewed global television through the lens of cultural imperialism, focusing primarily on programmes produced by US and UK markets and exported to foreign markets (Oren and Shahaf, 2012). This thesis does not attempt to analyse general and overarching structures of the global format trade, as many Western researchers have done (Moran and Malbon 2006; Moran, 1998; Moran and Keane, 2004; Moran and Keane, 2006), or to explore how the global communication process within the television-format trade is conducted (Lantzsch, Altmeppen and Will, 2009). Under the influence of media globalisation, television format as a programming concept (Schmitt *et al.* 2005) can be sold for adaptation in other countries. When television format comes to a country, it is usually adapted locally to meet national market conditions outside the country of origin (Jensen, 2009). The global dissemination of television formats shares and standardises media content, bringing Western values into China, and it also enables China's national TV industry to be shaped by its 'local' cultures (Waisbord and Jalfin, 2009) and 'local' television tastes (Moran, 1998).

Chinese scholars (Liang, 2012; Huang, 2013; Qu, 2013) as well as Western scholars (Waisbord, 2004; Brunsdon, 2001; Moran, 2008; Jensen, 2009) all insist that international television formats allows local producers to diminish uncertainty and minimise risks by using proven ideas and successful experiences. This is a crucial reason for the global popularity of television formats, as Silvio Waisbord (2004) has examined in his article *McTV: understanding the global popularity of television formats*. Television in Waisbord's view is simultaneously global and national, shaped by the globalisation of media economics and the pull of local and national cultures. The interesting fact is that although global audiences watch the same formats, their engagement with television content can be culturally different in ways that are not predicted.

The adaptation process of television content and formats refers to the concept of 'localisation', which has been central to analyses of media globalisation (Hjarvard, 2003). The concept of 'localisation' has also been used to 'describe the revitalization of local cultures and a commercial strategy to maximize profit in domestic media markets' (Waisbord and Jalfin, 2009, pp. 57). Waisbord and Jalfin (2009) summarise and discuss four distinct processes of 'localisation': 'glocalisation', domestication, hybridisation, and local production. First, the idea of localisation has been absorbed into the neologism 'glocalisation' (Robertson, 1995), which included two processes: the flexibility of the global media market to integrate local factors and the ability to articulate local contents within global ideas. Television producers adjust programme content to meet local preferences and concerns in order to maximise audiences and profits. Second, localisation has been used as a synonym for 'domestication' or the customisation of international content.

Third, localisation refers to processes of 'cultural hybridisation', a concept derived from postcolonial theory that indicates a genuine synthesis of diverse cultural elements into a new hybrid culture. The globalisation of media has accelerated processes of cultural hybridisation around the world by

providing opportunities for individuals to encounter media content that is produced outside their own cultural environments (Martin-Barbero, 2006; Straubhaar, 2007; Kraidy, 2002; 2005). Fourth, localisation points out the power that domestic media industries hold amid the increasing intricacies of media flows and global economies. The growth and consolidation of 'local champions' is a vehicle for the development of multilayered media flows (Straubhaar, 2007).

On the whole, as Waisbord and Jalfin (2009) argue, localisation is an industry strategy, linked to broad business operations and the dynamics of importation and exportation in a growing industry. To better understand the relationships between the television industry and government media policies, this thesis suggests it is necessary to examine how Canxing Production interpreted and implemented SAPPRFT's media policies and regulations, as well as how this process shaped the localisation process of *TVoC* in 2012.

1.3.3 Internet in China: control, regulation, and censorship

Apart from China's media regulator SAPPRFT's regulations on media content and its influence on the television industry, online censorship is another focus which needs to be introduced in this thesis. It is necessary to understand how social media platforms have been politically censored, and how this would have affected users' online participations and receptions. Online censorship is achieved in two ways in China: by laws and with the use of active filters (Zhao, 2016). 'Active filtering' as an aspect of China's censorship mechanism, censors anything within domestic sites which is 'hateful, threatening or pornographic' and which 'incites violence; or contains nudity or graphic or gratuitous violence' (Zhao, 2016). At a practical level, Tai (2006) describes that there are four strategies in regulating the Internet in China: state telecommunications laws, technological implementations of the 'Great Firewall' in controlling the flow of information online, the cooperation of service providers and content producers, and the monitoring of online behaviours of individual netizens.

In relation to this thesis, the last two are especially important. In Chapter 8 of this study of *TVoC* (2012)'s Baidu Tieba fan community, the cooperation of service providers and content producers will be explored as a clear case showing how social media has been censored by the CCP. In speaking of 'monitoring the online behaviours of individual netizens', this refers to the fact that the government can 'delete the content' or 'take down the site or even shut down the data centre' (Zhao, 2016, p, 78). In doing so, the CCP could control the information flow on the Internet so as to promote and preserve the so-called 'harmonious society' in order to maintain social stability and the political legitimacy of the Party (Marolt, 2011, p, 54).

As a consequence of, and reflection of, the CCP's strict online censorship, self-censorship is the usual tactic that the television industry, content producers and Chinese netizens will adopt to avoid any political problems. In this study, both Sina Weibo and Baidu Tieba offered strong assurances that posted content would be under control in exchange for official approval for them operating the service (Sullivan, 2012). Moreover, for Chinese netizens, individual Internet users have been constantly reminded that they are under government surveillance and threatened with vigorous punishments (Tai, 2006; Zheng, 2007). It is hence interesting to explore 1) the extent to which Chinese audiences and fans are critical in discussing television content within the Weibosphere; and 2) how Chinese audiences and fans resist and bypass the hegemonic and homogeneous restraints of the government (online censorship) in creative ways.

1.4 Thesis structure

This thesis is composed of an introduction and a methodology chapter, plus six further chapters, arranged into three sections, and a conclusion. The **Introduction** outlines the aim of the research and sheds light on both its cultural and media contexts. It demonstrates the current cultural phenomena

occurring in China's television industry and in society more widely. It highlights the processes of marketisation, diversification and entertainmentisation which the television industry in China has been experiencing since 2012. It provides an overview of reality television and its environment in mainland China, including relevant television history, regulatory policies relating to the television industry and an examination of the development of reality television in the country. It also reviews current studies of reality television, global television-format trading and the use of social media in relation to television programmes.

The **Methodology** chapter follows, in which sets the methodological frameworks and tools used in this research are set out. As a whole, the research adopts Douglas Kellner's 'multipersepectival' approach, by viewing culture from the perspectives of political economy, text analysis, and audience reception, in order to better understand the specificities of China's television audiences and their participatory culture, and also to explore wider questions around the activities and agencies of audiences in China and beyond. It then explains the specific methodological tools this thesis uses in viewing the research topic from two perspectives: historical reception studies and online ethnography. It also justifies the choice of the two social media platforms used in the study, Sina Weibo and Baidu Tieba, as the main data sources for audiences' online engagement with *TVoC*. The rest of the thesis is organised as follows.

Section one (Chapters 3 and 4) explores the relationship between government regulatory policies and the television industry in China, and analyses how these two factors consequently affected and shaped the content of the first season of *TVoC*. **Chapter 3** focuses on the role which government regulations and policies play in China's television market. It addresses particular media policies which were put in place in 2011 by the government regulator, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SARPPFT), and analyses how the imported television format was

shaped by government regulation and policies. Hence, it constructs the knowledge needed in developing an understanding of the specific media context in China at that time. Building upon this, the chapter demonstrates how Canxing Production altered programme content to both satisfy audiences' needs and to meet the requirements of the government in order to ensure survival under the censorship regime.

Chapter 4 provides an in-depth analysis of the participatory and interactive opportunities offered by Canxing Production in its promotional strategies to generate viewing audiences and online discussions. It uses the first episode of the first season of *TVoC* (2012) as an example, to look at how and when participation and interactivity was embedded or foregrounded, addressing three stages of the show: before broadcasting, during broadcasting and after the show. This analysis particularly focuses on a number of aspects of the programme: narrative structure, editing, use of dialogue and voiceover, and 'characterisation' (such as contestants' personal stories). Through the analysis of the industry's pre-designed offers embedded within *TVoC* (2012), this chapter suggests that the interactive opportunities provided by Canxing Production gave only an illusion of power to audiences; Chinese audiences did not have direct power over the programmes' narrative and texts.

Section two (Chapters 5 and 6) analyses how Chinese audiences engaged with *TVoC* (2012) on the social media platform Sina Weibo, focusing on negotiations which took place between the official promoters of the show, government regulations and audience responses. This investigation of Sina Weibo provides a potentially significant development in our understanding of audiences and their relationships with media. The analysis in **Chapter 5** focuses on the relationships between Canxing Production and particular celebrities (judges and other public figures), and the links between celebrities, their followers and the users of Canxing's Weibo site. It examines how and to what extent Chinese audiences responded to the promotional work done by Canxing Production on the official Weibo for *TVoC* (2012). The analysis

discusses issues of industry promotional strategies, looking at the way in which the official Weibo for *TVoC* (2012) offered Chinese audiences a platform on which to share their evaluations of the show and actors (judges), their expressions of fandom and their critiques of the contestants in the show. Moreover, it emphasises celebrity as a crucial secondary field of investigation in this question. The analysis here highlights the power of celebrities' Weibo within the Weibosphere and how such power might influence the online discussions of Chinese audiences. **Chapter 6** puts the emphasis on Chinese audiences' critical engagement and responses to *TVoC* (2012) on Sina Weibo. Drawing on the notion of anti-fandom, it seeks to illuminate the negative interpretive processes of Weibo audiences and users, which arose despite the show's reported actual successes.

Section three (Chapters 7 and 8) turns its focus on Chinese audiences' online engagement with *TVoC* (2012) towards an unofficial online space, Baidu Tieba, on which there were potential differences in what people were willing to discuss and share, as compared with Sina Weibo. **Chapter 7** explores the fan community and hierarchy of *TVoC* (2012) within Baidu Tieba, where executive fans (*bazhu*) had dominant power over other fans, as they regulated content and the meanings of texts to control the information flow in the space. It will focus particularly on how the ideas of power and hierarchy were imbedded into the fan community of *TVoC* (2012) on Baidu Tieba. It will move on to relate these to the nature of online censorship, and will also look for evidence of 'resistive' reception and behaviour that might, despite the constraints discussed, still challenge official directives and regulatory frameworks. **Chapter 8** further develops the investigation of the community of *TVoC* 2012's Baidu Tieba, focusing on how fans were able to be critical and tactical as they 'poached' and appropriated cultural texts in creative ways.

The **Conclusion** brings all of the findings from the research together and makes the necessary summaries and comparisons of the official (Sina Weibo) and unofficial (Baidu Tieba) spaces where audiences may have engaged

differently with *TVoC (2012)* and the relevant issues raised. It then demonstrates the implications and ramifications of this research. Finally, if explains the contributions of knowledge, originality, research limitations, and possibilities for future studies in this area.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will address my methodology, explaining how this study was carried out, and to answer the central question about how Chinese audiences engage with reality television show *TVoC* (2012) through social media, in regarding to the shifting media landscape and merging government policy. What I am interested in are the ways the industry, the government and Chinese audiences shaped and reshaped *TVoC* (2012) during its release in 2012 with its highest popularity.

To unfold such complicated power relations, this thesis explores the tensions between government control, television industry and Chinese audiences, looking at not only the audience engagement with *TVoC* (2012) but also the wider economic and political contexts that are necessary and inevitable. In order to understand better the specificities of China's television audiences and their participatory culture, and also to explore wider questions around the activities and agencies of audiences in China and beyond, it was necessary to use a 'multipersepectival' approach as Douglas Kellner have suggested (2011).

Therefore, to achieve these research purposes in the study, I use Kellner's suggestions of employing multivalent approaches to getting at culture. Kellner suggests researchers should look at texts from 'the perspectives of political economy, text analysis, and audience reception' (2011: p.15), and balancing those three components to provide a 'multipersepectival' approach to culture (2011: p.18). This comprehensive approach can avoid narrowly focusing on one dimension. In my research, the main focus is Chinese audiences' reception of *TVoC* (2012) and their online participatory culture. However, to trace back this historical moment and events, and to better understand the cultural phenomenon generated by *TVoC* (2012), it is suggested this research should not only to focus on audience reception, but also look at the

wider political environment in mainland China and the shifting landscape of current Chinese media industry. The analysing of Chinese media production and consumption culture is as important as the Chinese consumption culture studies. Textual analysis will be applied at later stage of the thesis (in Chapter 8). This will assist the understanding of audiences/fans' creative work on the Baidu Tieba fan forum, through a more detailed analysis of the language used. Although this thesis only uses textual analysis method to analyse a few specific cases, it is significant:

> We can never know for certain how people interpreted a particular text but we can look at the clues, gather evidence about similar sense-making practices, and make educated guesses (McKee, 2003, p.15).

Fairclough (1992) posited that textual analysis is a part of discourse analysis. Textual analysis helps this thesis to shed light on how Chinese fans' creative work on Baidu Tieba expresses their cultural and political resistances.

The framework of political economy is crucial for my analysis of these factors around the production of *TVoC* in 2012. As Kellner (2011) stresses, political economy alone has limitations as single approach to cultural studies. Although it is not the key approach to cultural studies, it is as important as audience reception and enables analysing cultural texts within their system of production and distribution (Kellner, 2011). Political economy allows this thesis to understand and analyse how media industry/culture taught and arguably, manipulates its audience, such as the media production process (importing television format) and production company's promotional strategies (through social media).

First, in this chapter, I will highlight the theoretical framework and approaches in this chapter, focuses on political economy and participatory culture. The political economy framework focusing on questions of power and ideology, which helps this thesis to analyse how economic, political and 'symbolic power' (Bourdieu, 1991) interact in shaping cultural artefacts; how media texts and content are formed and influenced by factors such as

government regulation, ownership and economic structures of the media. Besides, the participatory culture and media convergence framework provides this study a ground to understand audiences and fans' online activities and practices, addressing on issues of grassroots creativities, and the relationship between politics and popular culture.

Kellner suggests we should avoid cutting the field of culture into high and low, or popular against elite, but to explore how relations of power and domination are 'encoded' in cultural texts, and how people can resist the dominant encoded meanings and produce their own critical and alternative readings (2011: 9). Similar, Chris Barker summaries, the purpose of cultural studies are analytic, pedagogic and political, and sought to develop ways of thinking about culture and power that can be utilised by forms of social agency in the pursuit of change (2004: xviii). While emphasising the social agency of individuals and their capacity to resist social determination and dominant cultural agendas, it is also important to examine how and to what extent individuals can resist. And that is why this study suggests looking at the tensions between the importations of foreign television content by China's television industry, Chinese government control of media content and Chinese audiences' engagement. To examine how audiences and fans can symbolically resist dominant meanings and the consuming culture, works from British cultural studies of youth subculture provide this thesis with secure theoretic foundations. In Chapter 6 the idea of symbolic resistance relating to fan studies will be further developed and explored.

Thus, following Kellner's suggestions of employing multivalent approaches to gain access to culture, this thesis draws on both a macro approach (political economy) to highlight the power relations that exist between government regulations, media industry and Chinese audiences, and a micro approach (textural analysis and audience reception) to understand audiences and fans' engagement, and collective symbolic resistance in the age of the Internet and social media.

The second part of this chapter, I will specifically highlight the methodological tools. In general, I am doing a study that is based on historical reception study and online ethnography approach. From Chinese production culture to consumption culture, we then need to focus on audience reception of *TVoC* (2012) and beyond. Janet Staiger (2002)'s historical reception study method helps this study analyse the online discourse of audience discussions, to get to the heart of who said what, what they meant, and why around Chinese audiences' online participation and engagement. To approach these audience online discussions and activities, Matt Hills' (2002) model of online ethnography is used to collect data specifically from two social media platforms (Sina Weibo and Baidu Tieba).

2.2 Methodological framework

2.2.1 Political economy of cultural studies

To better understand and use the political economy of cultural studies, we need to first understand its definitions and historical transformation. In the 1970s, Murdock and Golding defined political economy of communications as the study of communication and media as commodities produced by capitalist industry. This focuses on the contradictions and problems of cultural production-owners, advertisers and political figures who cannot always do as they would wish; they operate within structures that constrain as well as facilitate, imposing limits as well as offering opportunities (Murdock & Golding, 2005: 63).

Then Nicholas Graham (1990) realized the importance of the cultural aspects of television consumption and its ideological dimensions. He sees political economy of communications as focuses on structures for the production of the media and communication industries under capitalism; on the production and consumption of media and communications; and on flows of information. Building on Graham, Oliver Boyd-Barrett states political economy

in media research is often 'associated with macro-questions of media ownership and control, interlocking directorships and other factors that bring together media industries with other media and with other industries, and with political-economic and social elites' (1995, p. 186). In summary, political economy is often characterised as studying how power is produced, distributed, exchanged and used. In this study, the power relations between Chinese government policy, media/television industry and Chinese audiences will be significantly explored and discussed.

To understand these power relations, I will use Vincent Mosco's definition of political economy in which he describes political economy as 'the study of the social relations, particularly power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources' (1995, p. 25). Specifically, Mosco provides three concepts for the application of political economy to the field of communications: commodification, spatialisation, and structuration. Commodification refers to the process in which a product's value deriving from human want or need (use value) is transformed into the value it could get from exchange (exchange value) (Mosco, 1996: 141). Put in this way, Mosco describes political economy as consideration of those business institutions and structures that produce and distribute commodities and to government bodies that regulate the process. Secondly, the term 'spatialisation' according to Mosco, refers to 'the process of overcoming the constraints of space and time in social life' (1996, pp. 173): the constraints on the movement or flow of information, goods and services, and also to the effects of communication on the processes of differentiation of corporate operations and their subsequent reintegration.

Mosco explained the political economy of communication has specifically addressed spatialisation in terms of the *institutional extension* of corporate power in the communication industry (1996, p. 175). The growth of media firms in size, taking up different forms of *corporate concentration,* can be explored using political economy to measure its assets, revenues, profit,

employees, and share value. Through analyse the process of corporate concentration (both horizontal and vertical), it reflects the influence of the state on the evolution of the Chinese television industry. Relevant media policies and regulations in China have shaped the way of the corporate concentration process. Canxing Production Company under the bigger corporate structure of Shanghai Media Group is a for-profit corporation but closely follow the central government's regulations and policies, serving commercial interests and the CCP's interests, promoting positive energies and images.

Structuration theory joins with the process of commodification and spatialisation to advance a political economy of communication. Mosco suggests structuration as a 'process by which structures are constituted out of human agency, even as they provide the very 'medium' of that constitution' (1996: 212). By this, Mosco means to examine the relationships between agency and structure and the complex interactions between the two, to incorporate the study of concrete social institutions and the dynamics of social processes.

More recently, according to Janet Wasko, political economy has concentrated especially on analysing issues relating to international communication, even before the recent emphasis on globalisation (2005:37). This has includes various political and economic issues related to a global communication system, and the expansion of media corporations internationally. Wasko (2005) also suggests political-economic analysis can be used to identify and then condemn those who control media and communication resources that are essential to understand relationships between media power and state power, as well as the media's relationships with other economic sectors.

Similarly to Wasco, scholar Anthony Fung have used political economy to examine the social relations that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources particularly in China case, where he suggests 'with the global participation in the political economy of production and distribution in China, it is not necessarily the case that the local people will

have a better and free life' (2008: 20). Fung's work has examined the ways global media, transnational capital and their owners survive these political and economic constraints to produce content in China that is largely of a popular cultural nature. The popularised reality television-format-trading business in China is the product of global media and transnational capital. When this product arrived in China, the negotiations between format-trading companies/agencies and local production companies were affected by the existing political economy context of China. To understand the 'localisation' of global media (specifically reality television format trading), the political economy context is significant. The state regulations, policy and forms of informal constraint over media/culture content and distribution, in terms of censorship, will shape global texts and cultural products. Thus, as Fung suggests, the political economy of communication could helps to 'explicate how culture, symbol, and mediated ideology are closely connected to the localisation strategies of transnational media corporations under the frame work of globalisation' (Fung, 2008, p.19).

Various studies have discussed and focused on media globalisation as a one-way flow of culture, from the global world to different locales. Within the political economy framework, power struggles and negotiations between different nations and between the dominant and the dominated have always been discussed. However, it is not the aim of this thesis to focus on discussions of globalisation theories and liberal conceptions. Using *TVoC* as a case study, this thesis aims to explore in depth the interplay and power relationships between the state, the TV industry and Chinese audiences.

Following Fung's work, under the political economy framework, the interplay of power between the global television format and the state media, between the commercial interests and the national ideology, and between the economics and politics in Chinese context will be explored and examined in this research. Thus the first chapter of this thesis provide an analysis of the state regulations, media policies and broader political–social environment in China,

41

exploring how these constrains have shaped the imported television format and content production of *TVoC* (2012). Fung's work on localising global capital in China provides this thesis with a useful framework and examples to follow. While questioning the so-called 'the increasing power of audiences' (Jenkins, 2002) in Western studies on audiences and new knowledge culture, Chapter 2 follows the same method to analyse the relations between industry's real strategies and the cultural consumptions of television audiences. Industry uses social media Sina Weibo as a tool to maximise audiences rating and offered plenty of participatory opportunities within the weekly narratives of *TVoC* (2012) and after the show.

The political economy and audience reception studies are two areas of research that can compliment rather than contradict one another, as Ingunn Hagen and Janet Wasco (2000) states. In the book *Consuming Audiences: Production and Reception in Media Research*, Hagen and Wasko demonstrate how both of them can help us to understand 'where power is located' (2000: 23). They suggest to understand audiences and how audiences interpret media content, not only in relation to the media text itself, but also 'constituted out of the entire set of social production relations' (2000: 44), and the 'interrelationships between communications industries, the state, other economic sectors, and key power bases' (2000:11).

Wasko's study of the Walt Disney Company, which examines the history and political economy of the company, as well as exploring various textual readings, and the reception of and resistance to Disney products, provides a good example for this thesis for studying Chinese television audiences' engagement with *TVoC* (2012). Such an approach can be used to trace the production context of the show and discuss its textual elements of 'participation/interactivity', as well as examining the power relations between industry, the state and Chinese audiences.

In the article *In Defence of a Political Economy of the Media*, Eileen Meehan and Janet Wasko (2013) argue that while ethnographic researches

explain how fans deal with media, political economy analyse provides 'a larger context for understanding fandom as a social and economic phenomenon'. Meehan further explains that fan ethnography allows researchers to identify sites where people exercise their agency, while studies in political economy offer a way to identify the economic structures that limit such exercise (2013: 72). That means to study fans and audiences should necessarily concerns mechanisms such as film/television promotion, publicity, and commerce. The great value of audiences is both to the media conglomerates and academic audience research.

2.2.2 Media convergence and participatory culture

From Michel Foucault through to fan studies, the idea of power remains central to academic research studies. In current audience research, the theories of Foucault are foregrounded to give a theoretical framework which supports the understanding of the relationship between cultural practices and wider social processes; it also makes a valuable contribution to the question of how broad questions of power can be researched. Foucault famously asserted that 'power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere' (1978, p. 93). In thus positing a polycentric and pervasive theory of power in the field of cultural studies, Foucault offered a more subtle definition of power, as the complex and multifaceted mechanics of control and influence, which could be observed in multifarious contexts, including schools, hospitals, prison systems, politics, sexuality and other broad-ranging socio-civic domains (1988; 2000).

To understand 'power', Foucault called for a more rigorous empirical approach to power, one that was grounded in concrete social situations rather than in theoretical abstractions. He provided a very thorough critical framework for examining the essence and operation of power relations which has become a key critical asset in the field. The association of power with subtle, often opaque and covert modes of control catalysed a broadened critical approach to perceptions of social phenomena. Power in cultural studies thus came to be seen

more broadly – as the ability of one agent/entity/institution to exert control (Fiske, 1993).

Similarly, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's ideas of 'power' shifted the critical lens of social theorists away from vast, overarching political and economic forces in the Marxian mould, and towards a more culturally informed interpretation of the relationships between people and their environments, which he termed 'cultural capital'. Adopting an economic metaphor, Boudieu's work on cultural capital was influential and significant in cultural studies. His concept of cultural capital existing in a system of exchange with economic and social capital refers to various symbolic elements of knowledge, skills and behaviours as aspects of one's cultural competence that demonstrate one's social status or standing in society. Cultural capital represented a new category of value which individuals may or may not possess, one constituted in a variety socially significant ways.

Bourdieu's work was pioneering because it moved scholarly perceptions of class away from a simplistic focus on economic restrictions, which he deemed insufficient in accounting for a wide variety of other 'disparities' (in educational achievement, most prominently) which expressed themselves most notably in differing class groups (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979, p. 8). Put simply, Bourdieu argued for an expanded interpretive compass when it came to explaining educational outcomes. His key contribution was to suggest that 'cultural habits' which were 'inherited from' (that is, learned within) the family could be used to explain academic attainment (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979, p. 14).

Both Foucault and Bourdieu's works posited new theories of power, status and legitimacy foregrounding multivalent socio-cultural forces. For Foucault, power permeated all aspects of social and cultural life, being articulated through discourse and technology in interpersonal as well as institutional forms. In a similar vein, Bourdieu was engaged in questions concerning 'forms and processes of the legitimisation of power and knowledge

in society' (Reed-Danahay, 2004, p. 64). In addition to these similar scholarly interests, both represented a clearly defined departure from the cultural studies and sociological traditions which preceded them.

The ideas of Foucault and Bourdieu were both very influential in the cultural studies departments of British universities, inflecting among others the works of Dick Hebdige, Angela McRobbie, Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson. In the 1960s, a group of academics at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham studied British youth subcultures including mods, skinheads, teddy boys, punks and rockers. They suggested that youth subcultures constituted the way in which different classes of young people manifested their opposition to the dominant social-cultural order. As youth subcultures struggled with the dominant order, they were seeking to modify, negotiate, resist or even overthrow its hegemony. Whether in the realm of style or of action, subcultural phenomena can be read as symbolic manifestations of the class struggle and the contradictions within capitalism. This can be seen very plainly in concepts relating to symbolic resistance – most notably in the texts *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* by Hebdige (1979) and *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, edited by Hall and Jefferson (1976).

The latter charts the ways in which various 'subcultures' articulate positions of resistance to the dominant culture, as well as the parent culture (home/working class), through certain rituals, pursuits and other forms of cultural iconography. The former text also emphasised the ways in which young people resisted the dominant culture, placing particular focus on style and appropriations of pre-existing cultural forms (haircuts, clothing, jewellery, and so on) to create new patterns of (often subversive) meaning which were specific to the participants' socio-economic context. Hebdige highlighted the great variety at play in such re-purposing of existing cultural artefacts, asserting that they allowed for 'infinite extension' as the component parts could be shifted 'in a variety of improvised combinations to generate new meanings

within them' (1979, p. 103). What unites the above works is the common theme of symbolic resistance. Hence British cultural theorists were engaging with a range of ideas concerning the means by which cultural identity could be constructed, expressed, resisted or re-purposed. As a consequence, one can identify a clear connection between the works of the above theorists and those of Foucault and Bourdieu. Just as Foucault and Bourdieu, in distinct though related ways, had outlined new perspectives of understanding how, where and why the mechanics of power operated on a social and historical scale, the British cultural theorists applied this same sophistication of approach to more nuanced and contemporary examples, looking in closer detail at the everyday experiences of young people.

By the early 1990s, studies looking at symbolic modes of resistance had gained currency and expanded in their purviews. Of key significance in this regard is the work of McRobbie, which examined ways in which the media themselves could potentially be used as subversive tools, for instance, to empower women (McRobbie, 1991). McRobbie conducted a very influential study of female cultural forms in the mass media, looking in particular at 'recognisable female forms' in teen girls' magazines, positing an implied feminist reading perspective. By extension, then, such reading positions could be interpreted as subversive seeing inasmuch as they existed within what may be perceived to be a male-dominated culture. Among her most important observations was that teen girls' magazines afforded a site of identity negotiation which eschewed subjugation to masculine priorities. McRobbie's point consequently depends upon a complex definition of rebellion and resistance, in which both are manifested in negation (to the dominant culture) as opposed to explicitly affirming a specific set of values. In follow-up research, McRobbie suggested that some of the potential gains she had previously identified in subversive reading positions had been mitigated. She accordingly identified a notable trend of 'neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life' within the media (McRobbie, 2004, p. 256). While

McRobbie's research was specifically concerned with gender, it must be seen as an important complementary work to those dealing with subcultures addressed above, particularly because it places emphasis on the marginalised and the subjugated, and the ways in which such groups may articulate positions of symbolic resistance.

More recent research has built on the work of the above French and British theorists, expanding to encompass subcultural theories and symbolic resistance in the specific domain of fandom. The analysis of fan culture was significant since it signified a change in audience research. Fans, merged as objects of audience research, are conceptually representative of a number of popular and academic fears concerning media power. Arguably, bearing something of the influence of post-modern trends, especially the tendency to reflexivity, fan studies advanced a framework of auto-ethnographic enquiry that prioritises self-reflexivity as a defence against subjective biases in academic research (Hills, 2001, p. 51).

Fandom, the theory holds, constitutes a critical and appreciative, though potentially subversive, position in regard to the artefact in question. Fandom, moreover, was seen to constitute a complex and intertextual endeavour sharing multiple interrelated discursive positions, allowing for the intertwining of 'high' and 'low' culture, in which even academia and fandom may possess porous boundaries. What Jenkins calls the idea of the 'Aca-Fan' (academic and fan in one) challenged the traditional divisions between researcher and fan subject (1992; 2006a).

As with Hall *et al.*, Hills and Jenkins invoke a more complex 'Foucauldian' interpretive framework in their understanding of cultural phenomena. Jenkins (1996; 2006b) especially has shed much light on the social, personal and cultural labour at stake in fandom, in particular such as obtains when fans engage with media texts across multiple platforms. In one sense, Jenkins extends the subcultural arguments as formed by Hall *et al.*, transposing the site of study from the specific locales in which youths would physically

congregate, to the emergent and increasingly interconnected digital realms constituted by convergence culture (Jenkins, 2012). In this respect, Jenkins (1992) and Fiske (1992) have been highly active in charting the implications of the expansive, interactive and ever-shifting mediasphere insofar as it may be seen as a dominant cultural landscape which young people must learn to navigate. Jenkins's application of de Certeau's 'strategy' and 'tactics' to include fandom is also significant and revelatory of this thesis's investigation into fan studies, as Chapter 8 will apply and discuss.

Built upon Boudieu's work on 'distinction' and 'cultural capital', Hills explored and criticised its application to the study of fan cultures. Fan practices thus can be seen to 'tacitly recognise the rules of their fan culture, attempting to build up different types of fan skill, knowledge and distinctions' (Hills, 2002, p. 46). Many scholars have also developed Boudieu's work, for instance in consequently coining the new terms 'popular cultural capital' (Fiske, 1992), 'subcultural capital' (Thornton, 1995), 'fan symbolic capital' (MacDonald, 1998) and 'fan social capital' (Hills, 2002). Hills examines and criticises Fiske and Thornton's works in developing Bourdieu's metaphor on fan culture, but he also affirmed that both of them have preserved and re-emphasised a central logic of Bourdieu's argument as 'the economic metaphor assumes a type of calculating subject, intent on maximising the return of their investment in forms of capital' (Hills, 2002, p. 55).

While Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital has been widely applied by many academic critics, Hills suggests we should be more explicitly analysing the social hierarchy of fandom, because the idea of cultural capital has been overly emphasised, while social capital and symbolic capital have been underplayed in fan culture studies. Hills also suggests that Bourdieu and his followers all have a tendency to interpret moral and aesthetic differences from the 'master-grid' of class difference, or through a limited 'dominant/subordinate' model.

Drawing on the notion of active audience, Kellner explains that 'media culture provides materials for individuals to create identities and meanings and cultural studies work on audiences detects a variety of potentially empowering uses of cultural forms' (2005: 14). The audiences' power hence is central for audience reception studies and fan studies. This research of Chinese audiences' engagement with *TVoC* (2012) draws on Henry Jenkins (2006)'s notions of 'media convergence' and 'participatory culture'. The term 'convergence culture' is used by Jenkins (2006) to describe a new era of transition where 'new and old media collide'. It refers to the merging of the various forms of media. When the 'audience' becomes the 'user', the media consumer has become an active participant. Media technology thus provides the opportunities and materials to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content.

In my investigation of Chinese audiences' engagement with *TVoC* (2012), focusing on audience discussion and fan community, I saw several examples of both media convergence. For instance, the increasing trend of global television-format trading to China, and the corporations between different medium to provide the '*multi-screen interactivity* (*多屏互动*)' in television programmes due to technology development. Those elements were reflected in the case of *TVoC* (2012), as the production company Canxin Production constantly providing its audiences with participatory/interactive opportunities in the show's narrative and through social media.

Formed around the media convergence and convergence culture, another notion, introduced by Jenkins (2006) is participatory culture. In *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, Jenkins defined participatory culture as 'a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices' (2009:7). With regards to culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies, audiences are now able to archive, annotate, appropriate, and

recirculate media content in powerful new ways, as Jenkins indicates (2009: 8). But not every player has equivalent power within the convergence culture. For example, government policies in China have more power in shaping the television industry and television programme content, while television industries have more power than others in producing culture artefacts.

However, audiences/fans actively engaging with popular culture artefacts through social media, cannot be simply leading to answer whether their power and agency is empowered by technological advancement and social media or not. By looking into the tensions between government policy, television industry, and audiences, we can discuss the power relations through the case of *TVoC* (2012). In broader term, the macro political-economic environment of a country, the development of Internet and technology access, or the globalisation of media culture, all may shaped or reshaped this notion of power relations.

2.3 Methodological tools

This study is interested in online discourses regarding to *TVoC* (2012). Within the culture studies framework, the theory and models of political economy and audience/fans analysis, the method this thesis chose to analysis the selecting sources is historical reception studies. I will then explain the reasons and the ways of this study selecting and choosing these online sources, and how it was applied in this study to make sense of the Chinese audiences' online discussions and practices with *TVoC* (2012).

2.3.1 Approach to audience reception: historical reception studies

Under the wider framework of participatory culture, this research chose to adopt the historical reception studies as utilised by critics such as Janet Staiger and Barbara Klinger. Staiger (2000) describes the historical reception studies work combines contemporary critical and cultural studies could help researchers to understand why distinct interpretive and affective experiences

circulate historically in specific social formations. For Staiger (1992), a historical examination of spectators' responses to cultural artefacts, describing historical interpretative strategies and explaining the cause of those specific strategies can make a valuable contribution to the history, criticism, and philosophy and philosophy of these cultural products. I have chosen historical reception studies because it ties together with arguments around political economy and also ties together with the kinds of online ethnographical work that is done by Matt Hills and Henry Jenkins.

This study is about the history of the discourse around reality show *TVoC* in 2012, looking at how it was produced and distributed, what government responses have shaped it, and how audiences responded to those factors. Staiger's historical reception method works best for this thesis. Historical reception study as a method can help me to go back to the historical moment and work through the historical moment through the archives and the traces of the event people have left behind. By recovering the traces of the event and the things that people left behind online, this research can recapture some of the meanings of the show had for people at the time when it came out. Although Staiger's studies focus more on the importance of knowing the film audience, her methodology can be applied by this research to study television audience reception.

Rafal Zaborowski and Frederik Dhaenens (2016) examined the recent academic researches of 'reception' in television studies, and find out most of the reception research within television studies aligns itself with a cultural studies approach. Qualitative ethnographic methods dominate the methodological frameworks, which include in-depth interviews (Dhoest, 2007), focus group conversations (Lacalle, 2012), and integrated ethnographic approaches (Tager, 2010), text-in-action methods (Wood, 2006), visual ethnographic methods (Adriaens, 2014), and auto-ethnography (Briggs, 2006; 2007). Among them all, in-depth interviews were the most used method, according to Zaborowski and Dhaenens (2016). Although using in-depth

interviews would help to explore audiences' reading of a particular text (Ang, 1985; Radway, 1984).

It is necessary to highlight the reason why this research not using the method of (ethnographic) interviews as many other researches did. I am not using interviews to talk to industry people and audiences, because the major concern of this thesis is how audiences engagement with *TVoC* (2012) through social media, not in discovering who they are and what cultural background they have. Compare to the interview method, historical reception studies help this study to access to more 'historical' materials that already left online, specifically tracing back those materials at different time or period in need.

In addition, I did not classify my methodology as critical discourse analyses (CDA), as many qualitative researches do. It is not saying my thesis is not dealing with discourse analysis. Emerged in the late 1980s, CDA has been developed and enhanced by scholars Norman Fairclough (1989; 1992; 1993; 1995a; 1995b; 1999), Ruth Wodak (1995; 1996; 1999), Teun van Dijk (1988; 1991; 1993; 1995; 1998a; 1998b) and others. Indeed, the methodological approach of CDA can enhance cultural studies, as Chris Barker and Dariusz Galasinski said, and CDA provides the analytic context, skills and tools for researchers to study how language constructs, constitutes and shapes the social world (2001), to reveal the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality and bias (Sheyholislami, 2001). However, in this study, I intend to explore and analyse these online discourse from the film, television and media studies field where Staiger specifically called her methodology as historical reception studies.

With this in mind, the following is an attempt to provide as much clarity as possible as to my methodological workings. In *The Film Studies Reader*, Staiger (2000) lists the steps which might occur when doing historical reception studies:

1) An object of analysis is determined. This object is an *event*, not a text: that is, it is a set of interpretations or affective experiences produced by individuals from an encounter with a text or set of texts within a social

situation. It is not an analysis of the text except in so far as to consider what textually might be facilitating the reading.

2) Traces of that event are located.

3) The traces are analysed textually and culturally. That is, as new historians elucidate causal processes to explain conjunctions called 'event' and then characterise the social significance of these event in relation to specific groups of people, so too does this research. Furthermore, the analyses avoid categorising receptions into preferred, negotiated, or resistant readings. Rather the processes of interpretation are described since more richness in explanation can be achieved than by reducing readings to three specific generalizations.

4) Finally, the range of readings is considered not only by what seems possible at that moment but also by what the readings did not consider. That is, structuring absences are as important as well (p. 182).

In my thesis, the object of analysis is the online conversations around *TVoC* (2012). It is an event and historical moment when millions of Chinese audiences talking about *TVoC* (2012) and beyond. The traces are all the discourses that I found out online, particularly from two online spaces: Sina Weibo and Baidu Tieba. Those traces are analysed textually and culturally, using critical discourse analysis. Therefore, I am particularly looking for clusters of opinions, analysing these clusters of discussions and opinions; and then make note of anything that is missing.

In summary, using the method of historical reception studies lets this study to look at a) Chinese government policy documents and regulations on television industry and reality television, b) to analysis the audio-visual texts of the show's weekly narrative, and c) to examine Chinese audiences' online discussions around reality television show, as a whole to reveal how Chinese audiences engage with *TVoC* (2012). This approach allows the examination of groups of people's online engagement with television content and beyond, in a way to investigate detailed descriptions of context, activity, interactions, direct quotations from individuals' experiences, attitudes, and beliefs (Patton, 1990). In summary, qualitative studies of media engagements come largely from the field of critical and cultural studies. Based on the social, political, and economic conditions and the viewers' constructed images of themselves, we could have different interpretations.

The first step of this thesis is to do historical reception study of the media industry and government, using discourse analysis to analyse the government policy documents and industry responses accordingly. And the purpose of this analyse is to show how powerful these policies are in shaping the media industry and media content, which enriches current academic studies of the political context in China's media industry. To analyse these policies, requires deeper understanding of the wider political environment in mainland China, not only focuses on the language used in the policies themselves, but to examine the influence and enforcement of these policies, and the power relationship between the media regulations and the media industry.

Specifically, regulatory media policies announced by SAPPRFT would be chosen as the main resources. Two main policies were chosen which are: Opinion Concerning Further Strengthening Comprehensive Satellite Television Channel Programme Management (关于进一步加强电视上星综合频道节目管理的意见, 2011), Notice on Doing Well the Work of Programming and Recording for the Satellite Television Channel Programme in 2014 (关于做好 2014 年电视上星综合频道节目编排和备案工作的通知, 2013).

The first policy was announced in 2011 and imposed from 1 January 2012, specifically requires 34 comprehensive satellite television channels must raise the broadcast amount of news-type programmes, and at the same time implement controls over the broadcast of a part of programme categories, in order to prevent excessive entertainmentisation and vulgar tendencies, satisfy the broad audiences' diverse and multi-level high-grade viewing requirements (Xinhua News, 2011). This policy is very important as the leading 'opinion' guidance for television industry, which has great impact on those satellite television channels that had been focusing on producing entertainment programmes including: dating game show (婚恋交友类), talent show (才艺竞秀类), variety show about love stories (情感故事类), game show (游戏竞技类), talk show (访谈脱口秀), reality television (真人秀).

Thus, this policy set the most significant context for the importation, production and broadcasting of *TVoC* in 2012. *TVoC* (2012) was self-defined as a *music reality television show* and was broadcasted on Zhejiang Satellite TV. Because it was broadcasted on such a type of channel and was such a particular type of show, which were both specifically targeted by the SAPPRFT's policy regulation, the first season of *TVoC* was heavily influenced by this policy. Besides reading the surface information that already listed in the 'opinion', the media industry and production companies in mainland China will also need to decode policy and interpret connotations to avoid potential risks for breaching the rules. In doing so, media policies indeed shaped the Chinese media industry and consequently changed the original format and content of the show.

This thesis will first explore and quote some of the original clauses from those policies announced by the SAPPRFT. The criteria for this selection are based on two key terms in those policies: '*reality television programme* (真人秀节目)' and '*satellite television channel* (电视上星综合频道)'. The language use of these clauses such as 'prevent excessive entertainmentisation and vulgar tendencies', will be discussed and analysed in relation to industry's implement and responds.

The second step is to analysis the audio-visual texts of the show's weekly narrative, specifically looking into the participatory opportunities within the weekly narratives of the first episode of *TVoC* (2012). Use historical reception studies method enables this research to explore what participation/interactive opportunities are encouraged within the narratives and when are people encouraged to get involved during and the show; more importantly, whom are audiences interacting with. The primary focus here is not the text itself and how audiences reading the show, but how they respond to those participation/interactive opportunities. The third step is to analyse audiences reception collected from two online social media platforms. In the next section, I will explain how this research used Hills' model of online ethnography to approach to Chinese audiences.

2.3.2 Online ethnography

In order to explore how Chinese audiences online engage with the reality show *TVoC* in 2012, this study tends to do a discourse analysis about Chinese government policies, the text of the show narrative, and what Chinese audiences were saying online about the show. Initially, ethnography was the common method in studying audience reception studies of television programmes, using participant observation and interviews to explore audiences' reading of a particular text (Ang, 1985; Radway, 1984). Ethnographic research on online practices and communications has become increasingly popular in the recent years with the growing influence and presence of the Internet in people's everyday lives.

However, this study was not able to do an interactive participated observation or interviews (Hine, 2000; Kozinets, 2009; Phillips, 2013) of online communities easily because the community for *TVoC* was largely anonymous that is very hard to recapture. The specific time period this study has chosen to look at is 2012 when *TVoC* was on air, which means it is not possible to be embedded in the cultural phenomenon either. Where people use methodologies from Kozinets (2009) and Hine (2000), they tend to use interactive study to get into the community and be a part of the community and conversations. The version this study takes is historical reception study used to recover the moment of historical events happening on social media.

Online ethnography rooted in ethnography. According to Ellen Seiter, ethnography is a research method developed from anthropology and sociology, and is 'a research process in which the anthropologist closely observe, records, and engage in the daily life of another culture - an experience labelled as the fieldwork method – and then writes accounts for this culture, emphasizing descriptive detail' (1999, p.10). Seiter also indicates that media ethnography research is based on long-term and in-depth fieldwork to study culture. However, as the Internet and technology develops, researchers had to take new way to study how audiences interpreted and used TV by observing their actual

practices in naturally occurring settings (Creeber, 2006), then seeking to relate these practices to questions of cultural power.

Thus, this thesis needs different methodological tools to do collecting data and analyse. In summary, this study uses online ethnography (Press & Livingstone, 2006; Baym, 2000; Hills, 2002) from the reception tradition to approach to Chinese audiences' online engagement, looking at audiences' life on the screen rather than looking at their life in front of the screen (Facer *et al.*, 2001; Livingstone, 2003). It is the way this study chosen to identifying and locating the audiences, and to collecting data. In particular, I will follow Matt Hills' model of online ethnography, looking for certain types of ways of 'speaking' and 'interaction' are permitted and encouraged on two online spaces (Sina Weibo & Baidu Tieba) and whether other forms of interactions, creativity and criticism are present. Hills talks about all the different kinds of fan communities (online/offline) and he specifically looked at online fans. The incorporation of online ethnography approach to collecting data is useful in identifying and locating the audience in conducting this research and in accessing audiences' engagement with *TVoC* in 2012, and did so in depth without interfering views upon television audiences.

In his book *Fan Cultures,* Hills (2002) suggests the mediation of 'new media' must be addressed rather than treated as an invisible term within the romanticized 'new'. What he emphasises is that we should not lose sight of differences introduced by the phenomenon of the 'audience-as-mediation', since cultural critics are otherwise in danger of replicating the 'transparency fallacy' in relation to new media technologies (Hills, 2002). He criticises some scholars' earlier assumptions about the method of ethnography that can reveal a particular group, allowing the researcher to explore fan communities without being obtrusive. He argues that this method is the 'oft-fantasised position of non-interventionist data-gathering for a particularly clear statement regarding unobtrusive/obtrusive Internet research strategies in relation to media audiences' (2002, p.175).

In research terms, Internet communities are as important as offline communities. In this thesis, I am not carrying out a purely deeper linguistic analyse of the language and dialogue from online places and communities. Specifically, Hills (2002) indicates that online ethnography should be concerned with the technology itself rather than only focusing on online interactions between participants, because culture online is not simply a version or reflection of 'offline' culture. The emergence of social media breaks the geographic constrains and boundaries of different online platforms (Baym, 2007; Jenkins, 2006). It also provides the possibilities of 'just-in-time' fandom. The term 'just-in-time' fandom, described by Hills (2002), refers to the audiences and fans that go online to discuss new episodes immediately after the episode's transmission time, or during commercial breaks.

Social media seems like a natural site of exploration and examination in audiences' engagement with *TVoC* (2012) and may further lead to exploration of values in production, distribution and media content. In the case of this research, social media Sina Weibo was used by media industry (particularly Canxin Production) as a tool and platform to maintain interactive relationships with its audiences. Specifically, the different time periods (before broadcasting, during broadcasting, and after broadcasting) reveal the different and various industrial promotional strategies. In looking at the data from the Sina Weibo, Hills' model shows a way to look into audience engagement with television programmes, in terms of time and technology itself. Adopting Hills' (2002) notion of 'just-in-time' fandom, this thesis explores the diversity of responses to *TVoC* (2012) by examining as directly as possible how given audiences actually understand and use popular culture texts in different broadcasting time periods, with the intention of unfolding and revealing the importance of 'audience engagement' in the current media landscape in China.

2.3.3 Selection of social media platforms

The first season of the reality television show *TVoC* in 2012 is used as the case study in this research, to specifically look into Chinese audiences' expressions,

discussions, and practices on social media platforms, and to question audiences' discursive power and agency through their online engagement. Audiences' reception of *TVoC* (2012) is not only discussed and negotiated around the text of the show itself, but it also goes beyond to the wider political economics, social relations and cultural experiences in China. The wider cultural social phenomenon generated by *TVoC* (2012) is a major reason for choosing it as a case study, as explained earlier in this chapter. Extensive online discussions and fan activities around the show are also valuable to look into, considering the dynamics and volumes of online debates around the show.

It is also because of these large numbers of audience participations and engagements that the programme has gained tremendous social attention from academia, industry and ordinary people. The media coverage of *TVoC* calls it a 'phenomenal programme' (Xianxiangji Jiemu, 现象级节目). Qualifying as a 'phenomenal programme' requires it not only to have big investment returns and high ratings, but more importantly it also means a lot of people watch the show, discuss it with each other, and forward information about it to their friends. Thus, contagious topics on social media become the fundamental condition that determines a 'phenomenal programme'. For academic research, audiences' online engagement with television programmes provides scholars with valuable research objects and materials. Thus, this thesis studies the two social media platforms in China which have the most users and influence.

The next sections thus will explain the criteria of choosing the two social media platforms. Two social media platforms, Sina Weibo and Baidu Tieba, are chosen for data collection and empirical discussions in regards to *TVoC* (2012). In particular, online ethnography and historical reception studies are two major methods in use; online ethnography helps to collect online data and historical reception studies enables empirical discussions and analysis.

In China, there are several companies provide Weibo platforms, such as Tencent Weibo, NetEase Weibo, Sohu Weibo and Sina Weibo. The reasons this thesis only chose Sina Weibo to examine are mainly concerns three aspects.

First, Sina Weibo is the most popular Weibo in China (Chen, Zhang, Lin. and Lv, 2011). Since Sina Weibo emerged in 2009, it grew quickly, attracting hundreds of millions of users and penetrating into Chinese people's everyday lives. According to the annual report of CINIC (2012), the total number of Internet users in China reached 538 million at the end of June 2012.

Among them, Sina Weibo had taken a share of over 30% of Internet users. Weibo is usually being considered as the Chinese version of Twitter (Sandoval, 2009). International social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook are blocked in mainland China, which led Sina Weibo to a position of exceptional advantages and competitiveness. Similar to Twitter, Sina Weibo enables users to post messages (up to 140 characters), pictures or video; and also to follow or repost other's messages.

Here, the 'others' include friends of the users, or well-know celebrities and public authority figures, or industrial accounts. By the end of 2010, more than 5,000 companies and 2,700 media organisations in China are using Sina Weibo (Wang, 2010). It is the second reason to choose Sina Weibo as one of the major platforms, because it demonstrates an interactive communication between ordinary users and celebrity 'opinion leaders' (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). The official Sina Weibo account for *TVoC* offers Chinese audiences a platform to share their evaluations of the show and actors (judges), their expressions of fandom and critiques of the contestants in the show. Audiences constantly engage with the official Sina Weibo account of *TVoC*, and also interact with organisational accounts such as Zhejiang Satellite Television (浙江卫视) and celebrity accounts such as the four coaches and some contestants. Using Sina Weibo platform in audience research could show us new ways in which part of the media audience is mobilising and interacting with the people that are making media. Ruth Deller (2010)'s work on Twitter, particularly audience research through Twitter, provides a good example of using Twitter to explore our understanding of media audiences, their relationships to media

products and the relationships between media audiences and those involved in producing the media content.

Many Chinese scholars believe that the success of *TVoC* relies on the interactive use of social media by the production team. The characteristics and essence of reality television contain a great deal of 'interaction'. Reality television often interacts with emerging communication platforms such as the Internet, broadband, mobile, text messaging, effectively bringing television, the web, newspapers, publishing and SMS together. Such integration has been embedded in all aspects of the production and broadcasting process, and also in the post-broadcasting period. Therefore, the characters and stories presented by reality television programmes are not 'external' to the audience; not something that has nothing to do with the audience. On the contrary, reality shows can interact with their audiences, allowing them to participate in and affect the content. When the audience becomes part of the programme, passive watching behaviour transforms into a kind of active participation and engagement.

However, the examination of Chinese audiences' engagement on social media may differ from that of Deller on Twitter. As highlighted at the beginning of this thesis, Chinese audiences' participation and interaction with television programmes have been regulated and shaped by government censors; for instance audiences could not vote via SMS. In light of this, Chinese production companies' understanding and use of the 'interactive' aspects of reality television may different from most Western countries.

The third reason is because Sina Weibo the site itself provides functions that allow researchers to trace back discussions and conversations by time. The website designs a function that categorise one account's microblog messages according to the months of the year. It displays a timeline on the page that allows users and researchers more accessible in tracing back to a specific post at specific time. In particular, four months (June–September 2012) were chosen to examine audiences' reception and practices. The broadcasting time period of the first season of *TVoC* is from 13th July to 30th September in 2012. Hence,

from the first post in 2rd June to 12th July is considered by this research as the 'pre-broadcasting' time. And this research also justifies other tow time period as the 'early-broadcasting' (13th July - 17th August 2012) and the 'later broadcasting' (17th August 2012 - 30th September 2012). By looking at how audiences respond (positively/negatively) to all this can we see how successful the industry/show was or not, and furthermore, the extent to which the success of the show was influenced by industrial and user activities, or by the Weibo accounts of celebrities, or other 'opinion leaders' in broader terms.

In general, social media, including sites like Sina Weibo, are having a growing impact on Chinese society and are thus bringing changes to China, through giving ordinary people new opportunities for self-expression of their emotions and opinions. This has drawn attention from some scholars who wish to explore political participation via social media and online activism. Indeed, Weibo allows various types of users' communication to become more transparent and more direct enabling mainstream media to respond immediately, as well as the authorities and public figures too. It is not the aim of this thesis to suggest that Weibo is functionally bringing digital democracy to China.

In terms of government censorship, on the one hand, Chinese authorities use a variety of means to control Weibo, while simultaneously some official departments have opened Weibo accounts to communicate with the public, and even in some cases to seek opinions. The involvement of government agencies, authorities and public figures in Weibo has made this 'public sphere' more complex. These opinion leaders have inevitably shaped Chinese audiences' discussions and engagement on Sina Weibo. While they are talking about *TVoC,* trending topics can go beyond the programme itself and extend into relevant social issues and conflicts.

To examine *TVoC* fandom this thesis hence chooses to look at the fan community on Baidu Tieba. Compared to Sina Weibo, Baidu Tieba is a relatively small closed circle of a group of fans that share the same interests and fan objects. Looking into Sina Weibo data shows us how audiences were

articulating their shared interests in a mediated online setting originally established by the official group of *TVoC;* while Baidu Tieba provides an ideal platform for examining how fans operate in order to maintain a community of like-minded individuals. Baidu Tieba, a social network owned by Baidu, was established in December 2003 with fan-forum-like features and it now has one billion registered users and close to 8.2 million topic boards. The number of active monthly users is close to 300 million. The fan-generated tieba for *TVoC,* founded in June 2012, is chosen as the main space and community for research.

Talking about fandom within the Baidu Tieba, this thesis is not going to make distinctions between the notions of 'audiences' and 'fans'. Instead, it is aimed to observe audiences' media engagement at different places and the potential differences. As suggested by Hills (2002) that current scholars must view online activity as fans' own performance of audience hood instead of see online fan activity as an unobstructed view of the fan community. Thus, Baidu Tieba was selected as a platform to examine audiences' activities at fan forums and I am interested in exploring whether different types of interactions are present within the forums – perhaps more critical of the show, the TV industry or wider social and political contexts – but also whether the types of creative and political (inter)activities discussed by Jenkins such as fan labour (2006, 2007a) and activism (2007b) are more ubiquitous and/or more extreme.

In particular, I look into fan activities and engagement at Baidu Tieba for two purposes. One is to explore and observe the ideas of power and hierarchy that have imbedded in the fan community of *TVoC* at Baidu Tieba, focusing on fan hierarchy of the community that integrates fan self-regulations and fan promotion. The historical reception method thus enables this thesis to look at a number of divergent materials collected from the Baidu Tieba of *TVoC,* community regulations and rules made by Baidu Tieba and the bazhu of *TVoC;* and to identify the contours of patterns in the audience reception data, analyse similarities and differences of perception and practice in fan's interaction with the community regulations and their meanings.

The second purpose is to look into fan creativity and labour with regards to their reception of government censor and regulations. When fans groups came to the new media age, they quickly become a main force in the wave of participatory. However, comparing to Western fans, Chinese fans seem to have less free expression and need to confront political regulations and censors. The unofficial space Baidu Tieba, full of tactical movements, allows this research to explore how Baidu Tieba is used and customised by active fans who remake it to be what they need to subvert and divert the dominate power through their own conceptual, creative and political practices; and to what ends. The criteria for selecting fan posts from the millions of them available are based on two major fan creativities: *e gao* and *tu cao*. For instance, I searched the key words *tu cao* (ironic criticism) in *TVoC*'s Baidu Tieba, with the result shows more than 77,249 relevant posts including 1,972 of them titled with the term *tu cao*. These 1,972 *tu cao* posts are almost 100 times the 200 *e ago* posts. The quantitative data directly shows us the popularity of another cultural term *tu cao* that has generated a subcultural phenomenon in China.

Then, I narrowed down fans' posts by only look at the ones with the term 'tu cao' in the title of those posts. When fans use the term 'tu cao' in the title, it is a way that fans to identify their creative works and simultaneously attract the attention from other fans. Looking at these data, I will present a close reading of some of the most influential *e gao* and *tu cao* cases on TVoC's Baidu Tieba in order to investigate the cultural politics of online fan criticism and resistance: the contexts of Chinese political regulations; the social and political critique implicated in the texts. Speaking of 'influential', I mean some posts that generated most fans' responses and interactivities within the Baidu Tieba community.

2.4 Research ethics

This research follows the University of East Anglia's Research Ethics Policy and guidance. Take into account ethical considerations can help to minimise risk to participants and researchers when dealing with research involving human subject. In terms of research involving human participants, the University of East Anglia's Research Ethics Policy defines it as broadly to include research that:

- directly involves people in the research activities, through their physical (or virtual) participation. This may be interventional (e.g. surgery, drug trials, interviews, questionnaires) or non-interventional research (e.g., surveys, observational research) and may require the active or passive involvement of a person;
- indirectly involves people in the research activities, through their provision of, or access to, information, personal data and/or tissue;
- involves people on behalf of others (e.g. legal guardians of children and the psychologically or physically impaired and supervisors of people under controlled environments (e.g. prisoners, school pupils)).

My research into Chinese audiences' online engagement with *TVoC* (2012) is a non-interventional research that observing what audiences have talked about the show on social media. Thus, audiences and users will not be informed.

As Martin Barker (2013) summarised, the four major dimensions of research ethics protocols are (a) privacy and confidentiality; (b) informed consent; (c) protection of vulnerable groups; and (d) the avoidance of harm. In relation to my research, the 'privacy' and 'harm' would be the main concerns. The two online spaces this thesis chosen to look at, are open to anonymous, but both requires personal users to register a username with mobile phone number or email address. With Baidu Tieba, only the mobile phone number from the mainland China can be used to register. Nevertheless, Sina Weibo seems more international that users can both use email address and mobile phone number of other 14 countries (US, Canada, Brazil, Malaysia, Australia, Japan, Korean, Singapore, England, France, Russia, India, Thailand, and Germany). Without registration, people will not be able to leave comments and interact with the others. Although these semi-open spaces at some extent have protected users'

information flow and communication, it still has danger that users' real identity can be traced by government or organisations in some extreme cases.

This thesis tries the best to protect the safety issues of those users who left traces behind on social media. Their usernames would not be revealed in this thesis. I shall only keep the time and day when they left commons because it is important in relation to this study's exploration into the different broadcasting period of *TVoC* in 2012. To be clearer, the notion of *harm* this thesis means refers to the potential leaking of user information while they being critical about government, policies and media industry. However, I do named some usernames of Sina Weibo users that are official/public accounts, celebrities and authority figures (the VIP users). Moderators from the Baidu Tieba's *TVoC* fan forum are addressed by usernames as well.

To balance between the researcher's code of ethics and academic rigor, this research also want to make clear that the selecting sources are in Chinese language. All sources of audiences' online commentaries are properly translated into English. Taking into account the possible 'feelings of pain' that might connect to specific subject and issues, the original Chinese language will not be presented in this thesis.

Chapter 3: 'Localisation': regulation, politics and industry as factors impacting on the creation and content of *The Voice of China*

3.1 Introduction

Both adapted from a Dutch production, *TVoC* (China) and NBC's *The Voice* (US) made a dramatic difference to television ratings in their respective countries. Following the showing of its premiere episode on 13 July 2012, *TVoC* attracted up to 64 million viewers a week, compared to 14 million in the US (CBS News, 2013). Such success caught the eye not only of China's media industry and academics, but also the Chinese government regulator. The 'format trading' of reality television programmes was not new to China, but it had never been so popular before. In the so-called 'Format Import Year' of 2013, a total of more than 30 reality shows with foreign-imported formats were on air in mainland China (Fang, 2013), and almost every provincial television station aired at least one such show (Li, 2014). The formats for these reality shows are often transnational in origin, borrowing from programmes such as *I am a Singer* (Korea), *Kpop Star* (Korea), *So You Think You Can Dance (US), Dancing With the Stars* (US)*, TV Total Turmspringen* (Germany)*, Britain's Got Talent* (UK) and *The X Factor* (UK). These shows share much in common: larger-than-ever investments, A-list celebrities as judges, imported formats and contestants with heart-rending stories of family tragedies, subsequently repeatedly found by angry audiences to be false or exaggerated (Han, 2013). The mass production of this kind of reality show has changed the landscape of China's media industry and the markets it operates in.

On one hand, the sudden popularity of reality television format trading may spur the growth of China's television market through its mature standardisation of format and the spaces it has developed that allow China's

national TV industry to be shaped/localised according to national ideologies. On the other hand, the global dissemination of formats may also bring uncertainty and present the Chinese government with difficulties, as it takes time to understand this global phenomenon and to ponder how to regulate it. Therefore, this is a significant point in China's development at which to rethink censorship and regulations; such consideration will help us to understand censorship, not simply as passive suppression but more in terms of the (inter)relationships between government sensors, the Chinese television industry and the media market.

Many scholars have addressed issues around the (im)balance in China between marketisation and state control over culture in terms of censorship and regulation (Keane, 2010; Zhu and Nakajima, 2010; Johnson, 2012; Zhou, 2015). Since China's accession to the WTO in 2001, the Chinese government has had to adopt a series of market-oriented reforms in order to develop intensified commercialisation, as well as to deal with possible challenges from international media groups. For instance, the television policy STVPB, addressed in an earlier chapter, demonstrates the government's determination to open up the market and may contribute towards a market economy developing in the industry. However, alongside this reform process, Chinese government's censorship control of media and culture did not loosen.

Several examples demonstrate that China's major media regulator and censor, the SAPPRFT, has tried to curtail the television market since 2012 as a reaction to the phenomenal success of *TVoC*. On 24 July 2013, SAPPRFT issued a statement announcing a new regulation which postponed ready-to-run talent competition shows, and adjusted the allowed broadcast time of current shows so that they could no longer occupy large blocks of prime time viewing. In this statement, TV producers were instructed to abstain from 'extravagance, putting on dazzling packaging and playing up sensational elements' in TV programme productions (CBS News, 2013). More strictly, the statement placed a limitation on each of the 34 satellite channels so that they

could only broadcast a maximum of two entertainment shows a week, with a limited time of no more than 90 minutes for each episode (Lin, 2013). In the following year (2014) satellite TV channels were, according to the *People's Daily* (the Communist Party's official news outlet), allowed to show only one new foreign-format-based reality show a year (Liu, 2013). The authorities also required TV channels to abstain from broadcasting shows based on foreign formats during prime time (7.30–10 p.m.).

These government interventions once again provide support for the international understanding of China's regulatory system as a mechanism used by the Chinese government over many years to keep a tight rein on both traditional and new media, with the intention of preventing potential subversion of its authority. Thus, there have been various stories around how the Chinese government strictly controls and intervenes in media content and popular culture, and censors the Internet by using monitoring systems and firewalls, shutting down publications and websites and jailing dissident journalists, bloggers and activists. In this way, the Internet in China has been seen in Western media and academic scholarship as a battleground between state censorship and free expression. On the surface, censorship in China may simply be understood through a 'prohibition/institution' model that explains censorship 'in the first instance as a form of prohibition, of excision, of 'cutting-out', whereby certain subjects are forbidden expression in representations' (Kuhn, 1986, p.14). Departing from this view, and in considering the issue of censorship and media regulation as having general relevance, Chinese audiences and Internet users are more likely to adopt an anti-censorship stance which denounces political and moral censorship of media content and free expression. However, Chinese audiences as consumers should not be simply understood as part of a passive and oppressed public which lacks power or impact. Investigation of the whole range of wider power relationships and interplays between audiences, the media industry and the government censors

can enhance our understanding of the 'localisation' process of imported reality television in current China, in terms of both format and content.

China's television industry, which is caught between socialist ideology and capitalist imperatives (Zhou, 2015), is currently facing competition from both domestic and international rivals (De Burgh, Zeng and Chen, 2011). Thus the format of reality television that has already been successful elsewhere in the world seems to offer a significant opportunity for domestic TV networks to achieve high audience ratings with lower costs and risks than other programming options (Liang, 2012); it is also considered to be easier in practice for producers to localise television formats than to produce new/original shows, with format franchising always providing room for revision (Waisbord, 2004). The challenge of programme localisation is not just about ensuring quality standards and creative content. It also references the difficulties and contradictions for China's television industry in how to localise foreign-format programmes into formats which are 'politically right' for Chinese audiences. In another words, production companies' understanding and interpretation of existing regulatory policies and censorship mechanisms are the key factors in shaping very important developments during the localisation process.

Therefore, this thesis sees the current regulations and censorship of the television-format localisation process as a complex example through which to understand media censorship and the media landscape in China. As Annette Kuhn (1986) suggested in her understanding of film censorship, to understand the format localisation process in a country which has strict regulatory government censorship, it is necessary to examine the social, historical and institutional context in which reality television is produced, distributed and consumed. Rather than simply understanding and defining censorship, in her study of British film censorship, the author indicates that:

Historical and sociological studies of film censorship have invariably emphasised its institutional and prohibitive aspects, constructing it as an activity on the part of specific organisations – organisations whose avowed

70

objective is to place controls on films, usually by excluding from them themes, topics and images deemed for one reason or another unacceptable (Kuhn, 1986, p. 315).

While acknowledging that censorship is not a one-way traffic of repression, Kuhn, in borrowing from Foucault's theories of power, redefines censorship as a far more fluid and productive process; 'an activity which participates in an apparatus, a set of practices whose interrelations are imbued not so much with power as with the 'play' of power (1986, p. 27)'. Employing Kuhn's approach to understanding censorship, the localisation of reality television format should not be simply seen as a passive object subordinate to the SARPPFT or other institutional censors; rather, it is a power negotiation between the government censors and production companies.

Building upon Kuhn's ideas, Kate Egan's (2007) book *Trash or treasure? Censorship and the changing meanings of the video nasties,* examines the discourses that inform the circulation of a group of banned films, suggesting that censorship is not just about rules and regulations, but also about the discourses that generate censorship and the cultural and commercial consequences of a censorship act or law. From this viewpoint, Egan suggests there should be less focus on the rules and regulations of the censor and more on the discursive sites where key practices and discourses around censorship emerge. Thus, analysing 'a range of discourse, groups and ideologies in context' (Egan, 2007, p. 10) would help in developing understanding of the censorship that is embedded in the format localisation process taking place in China. Among China's media regulators and censors, the SARPPFT is not the only one involved, but it is the most identifiable and prohibitive institution, in that it directly executes 'cuts, bans, and censor boards' (Kuhn, 1986, p. 315). Current research into China's censorship inevitably involves and stresses the SARPPFT's media policies and regulations in various fields (Zhao, 2008; Scotton and Hachten, 2010; Willis and Chan, 2016; Su, 2016, Chin, 2017). The rules and regulations directly issued from the state censors are indeed still

central in influencing and shaping television content. Previous censorship and regulations (cuts, bans, and censor boards) imposed on television programmes provide examples of and assist in tracing production company actions taken to avoid censorship, both in preproduction and postproduction. Through making a comparison between the formats of *The Voice* (USA) and *TVoC*, Qu Jirong (2013) has discussed the principles of the localisation process for foreign formats. In this comparison, Qu briefly points out that while in *The Voice (USA)*, the power is always in the hands of its audiences, because the outcome is decided solely by public vote, *TVoC* only gives such power to parts of the audience, and to media representatives who were present at the live studio recording of the finale episode. His discussion of the localisation process does not, however, explain the reasons for such a difference, for instance the historical ban on public voting within reality shows following on from *Super Girl*, the show which has drew more than 400 million viewers who sent a total of 8 million text-message votes for their favourite contestants in the final episode in 2005 (He, 2012). To investigate this aspect of government influence over reality television formats, a brief review of China's media regulations and interventions from the *Super Girl* case in 2004 (known as the first wave of reality television in China) to TVoC in 2012 (known as the second wave (Beijing Daily News, 2012)) is useful in understanding how the format of *TVoC* was shaped by government regulations and policies. By comparing the Chinese version to the original Dutch format of *The Voice of Holland*, which was aired in Holland in 2010, this chapter will highlight and identify ways in which *TVoC's* format has been changed and localised for Chinese audiences, through investigating the details of how and why this process of adaptation and localisation took place.

However, rather than focusing on criticising the Chinese government's media regulations and policies, or addressing the political significance of democracy in the conventional sense (topics which will be explored in Chapter Five), this chapter aims to unpack the power relationships which exist between

television-format localisation, government censorship and audiences. It will look at China's media regulations, its politics and its television industry as factors, exploring how they impacted on the content localisation process of *TVoC*, and addressing how and why the purchased format of *The Voice* changed when it came to China.

While Liu Xichen, CEO of Shixi Media (a format-trading company), claims that the secret of *TVoC's* success lies in the fact that it strictly followed the original format, and that this is the key to the success of the show, this chapter argues that the importation of successful foreign TV formats cannot guarantee the success of Chinese TV adaptations. Under the highly restrictive media regulations in China, producers seek their own ways to maintain audiences, giving them 'illusions' of participatory power in determining competition results. The producers achieve this result through encouraging audiences to use new media to participate and interact. Thus, the last section of this chapter will go on to analyse how the industry has reshaped the relationship between Chinese audiences and *TVoC*.

3.2 Government regulation in shaping *The Voice of China*

The first section of this chapter will discuss and explain why the format localisation process of *TVoC* is important, and why it is unique to China. This thesis argues that government regulation changes the relationship between formats, industry and Chinese audiences. Unlike experiences in other countries, where producers could follow the original format, the situation is far more complicated in mainland China under the regulations and control of the Communist Party, since national culture and ideologies have to be taken into serious consideration.

Rebecca Yang, the CEO of the IPCN, finally signed the contract with Talpa in 2011, after several rounds of negotiations. Yang stated that, in order to eliminate Talpa's biggest concern about the Chinese government and its

policies, the wording of the Force Majeure/Act of God clause in the contract for *TVoC* had been changed from 'God' to 'government', to protect them from political risks (Xie, 2012). 'Act of God' is a legal term for events outside human control, such as sudden floods or other natural disasters, for which no one can be held responsible (Black, 1990, p. 33). What Yang did was to alter the contracts by changing the usual 'Act of God' to 'Act of government', in order to indemnify Tapla against unpredictable Chinese government interventions and changing media policies.

The unstable media regulation system and frequently changing media policies have a huge impact on media content creation in mainland China, and politics has always been considered as the most complex theme in mainland China. As Yan-Xu Tong (2002) points out, social changes in China have been brought about by confrontations between classes, national interests and interest groups. Hence the impact of politics is found in almost every aspect of Chinese society, including culture and cultural industries. While the TV industry stands between the government and audiences, the balance of following political regulations and satisfying audiences' needs is not easy to achieve.

In China, mechanisms of regulatory control, such as the licensing and permit system and ad hoc administrative orders, allow the state to retain strategic control over media content and enable state media to secure their own profits (Zhao and Guo, 2008). The key regulatory authorities for the media are: the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT), General Administration of Press and Publishing (GAPP), Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT), Ministry of Culture (MOC) and Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM). However, in terms of the political impact on media content, SAPPRFT is the most important and direct regulator for examination in this chapter.

The official Chinese Embassy in India's website (State administration of radio, film and television, no date) identifies SAPPRFT as an organisation under the direct supervision of the State Council, which is in charge of the

country's radio, television and film industry and directly supervises China National Radio, China Radio International and China Central Television. SAPPRFT coordinates important propaganda activities with TV stations and censors, organising and managing the transmission coverage of their programmes. With its clear political stance, in 1997 SAPPRFT implemented a media monitoring system to monitor all TV programming for overall political orientation (Zhao and Guo, 2008). This system is called 'Guang Bo Dian Shi Guan Li Tiao Li' (Regulations on Administration of Radio and Television), and it constructs the basic rules and regulations that all TV stations and production companies should follow. Then in 2004 a further system, known as the 'Regulations for the Administration of, Production of, and Dealing in Radio and Television Programmes', further censored China's broadcast content (Baker and McKenzie, 2012).

Besides putting in place and monitoring fundamental regulations, SAPPRFT also has direct editorial responsibilities over major state media, including CCTV (China Central Television), Beijing TV, Zhejiang TV, and so on, through publishing normative documents called 'Tong Zhi' (notifications), to deal with particular media phenomena and issues. For instance in July 2013 there were considered to be too many musical talent shows on air in mainland China, most of them having been adapted from foreign TV programmes. As a result, SAPPRFT gave provincial TV stations orders that 'satellite channels are not allowed to produce singing talent shows during a given period of time' (Han, 2013), and 12 ongoing singing shows were told to adjust their broadcast schedules, with some upcoming shows being put on hold. Production companies have to follow notifications and orders such as these from SAPPRFT, because the majority of media outlets in China are wholly state-owned and private investors are therefore highly restricted.

Private ownership of television channels is prohibited in China and this means that state broadcasters such as CCTV remain the official outlets for all private productions. In order to have programmes shown via state television,

private production companies usually closely follow advice from TV stations, right through from initial brainstorming to final production, and this in fact has constituted the main mechanism of content control in the country. As scholar Chang (2008) has argued, the success of a television programme relies not only on creative content but also on the content providers' flexibility and creativity in dealing with SAPPRFT regulations and officials. This insight reveals the interdependent relationship between TV stations, production companies and SAPPRFT.

It can be said that China's TV companies are tightly state-controlled and must adhere to tough rules on morality as well as strict political guidelines. Over the last decade, SAPPRFT's regulations and controls on reality shows has become increasingly strict, including content censorship, broadcasting time limits, and even the form of audiences' participation. Taking reality talent show *Super Girl* as an example, there were many direct regulations issued by SAPPRFT regarding the show. Due to the huge influence of the show, SAPPRFT imposed a rule in 2006 that 'contestants who participated in a competition reality show must be at least 18 years old' (Jiang and Li, 2011), in order to secure the safety of teenagers. In 2004 the show *Super Girl* from Hunan Satellite Television attracted 400 million Chinese viewers and soon gained fame as the most popular entertainment show in the country, with following seasons planned. However, it was taken off the air on September 16th 2011 by SAPPRFT, due to its failure to meet the regulations, including running for longer than two hours and being screened during prime time (Moore, 2011). A similar example of such activity is the 2007 controversy over Chongqing Satellite Television's talent show *Di Yi Ci Xin Dong* (First Heart Throb); SAPPRFT banned the show on 15 August 2007, because of 'the gaffes of judges' and 'low taste' (Wang and Lei, 2007). On 23 August of the same year, SAPPRFT required a cosmetic surgery reality show, *Mei Li Xin Yue* (Beauty Promises), to stop broadcasting immediately on Guangdong TV, because it felt

that the show's content included transsexual issues, images of blood and horror and 'low taste' (Xia, 2007).

More recently, Chinese scholars such as Lu (2013) and Zheng (2013), observed that 'Xian Yu Lin' (China orders cutback on TV entertainment in 2011) and 'Jia Qiang Ban Xian Yu Lin' (further orders of cutbacks on TV entertainment in 2013) have become the key principles and guidelines for media content production in China's recent TV industry. In these regulations, SAPPRFT limited the number of entertainment programmes, from matchmaking game shows to dance contests, which it allowed to be aired. From I January 2012, Provincial television stations were required to broadcast more morality-building programmes, disseminating traditional virtues and socialist core values, and had to implement controls to prevent 'excessive entertainment and vulgar tendencies' (Xinhua News, 2012). These so-called 'suggestions' in fact further limited broadcasts of dating shows, talent competitions and five other similar types of programmes. Between the prime time hours of 7:30 p.m. and 10 p.m., satellite television stations cannot air more than two of these types of programme weekly, and no more than nine shows of this type can be aired nationwide (Xinhua News, 2012).

The first season of *TVoC* was launched in 2012, one year after the 'Orders Cutback on TV Entertainment'. The programme content was hugely influenced by the regulations. Hence, in this political context, this chapter will look at how the television industry has responded to government media regulations and how these regulations changed the format of *TVoC*.

3.3 Industry response to the government regulations

Before discussing and analysing the changes made in the format and content of *TVoC*, the global TV format market and the definition of 'TV format' will be introduced. Then the format of *TVoC* (the first season in 2012 as brought from

Talpa by Star Media, hereafter referred to as TVoC (2012)) and how it has been changed under the impact of the SAPPRFT regulations will be investigated.

TV formats can be sold to media companies in China by companies in other countries, providing new possibilities for cultural hybridisation in global TV exchanges (Waisbord, 2004) but also perhaps reducing the variety and diversity within cultures (Lindner, 2012). In 2009 the Format Recognition and Protection Association (FRAPA), which is made up of members from 34 countries worldwide, published a report, '*TV Formats to the World'*, which shows that a total of 445 original formats had found their way to foreign screens between 2006 and 2008. During that time, the production value generated by traded formats reached approximately €9.3 billion (FRAPA Report, 2009). Through 20 years of development, a huge and lucrative global industry of TV format trading has been generated which has now penetrated into China's TV market. The report also shows that talent shows, and studio game and quiz shows are the top-earning genres, along with makeover/coaching shows (FRAPA Report, 2009), and this trend is the same in China as in other countries.

As Waisbord (2004) indicated, globalisation has intensified interconnectivity, a term which can be defined as structural and institutional linkages among television systems and industries worldwide, resulting in an increasingly integrated global business governed by similar practices and goals. The dynamics of such global business are 'reflected in the popularity of television formats' (Waisbord, 2004, p. 359) and format here means programming ideas that can be adapted and produced by different national ideologies. For instance, there have been 46 versions of the reality competition show *Pop Idol* produced around the world, and *Got Talent* and *The Voice* have been spun off into more than 50 territories. While some people may exaggerate the importance of TV formats (Wang, 2013; Yu, 2012), it is still necessary to take a look at what a TV format contains and what role TV formats play in the success of reality shows.

Simply speaking, the term 'TV format', as defined by Austin Burbridge of Cinema Minima (Burbridge, 2014), describes the overall concept, premise and branding of a copyrighted TV programme. In detail, a TV format merges both the exogenous culture inherent in the format and the local dynamics input by local producers (Zhang, X., 2014). For local TV producers, it seems easier in practice to localise TV formats rather than to produce new shows (Waisbord, 2004). This is because format franchising always provides room for revision of imported formats, thus offering some measure of predictability based on past performance in numerous countries. It is also believed that format creates a chain of value that can be modified and extended across national boundaries, as well as within national media systems. Keane points out that, unlike finished programmes, a format can be 'filled' with culturally specific content, and licensed co-productions can ensure the potential for added value in terms of technology transfer (Keane, 2002).

Scholars who are more critical, such as Waisbord, would argue that although format television 'does not eradicate national cultures', it is a reflection of a 'global industry solely concerned with quick commercial success and [with] no patience for innovation' (Waisbord, 1988, p. 381). Here, the term 'innovation' is highly concerned by Chinese government in these days with regards to television programmes. There was a fear among Chinese television industry that the buying spree of foreign TV programme may cause harm to local television market. Scholar Gong Wen, from Tsinghua University, thinks that recent Chinese reality shows are in their second stage of development: copyright importation and localisation, following the initial imitation stage. In this second development stage, rather than seeking to make a construction according to a foreign model, China seems to be turning in a direction that jettisons most of the tenets of Western ideology and allows Chinese people to rediscover traditional ways of making life work, using the tools and opportunities provided by the global economy (Pan, 2008). Pan also argues that the success of China is not a result of adopting Western ways, but of sloughing

them off. Here the question arises: does the format localisation process indicate a sloughing off Western ideologies or decreasing opportunities for diverse and complex representations of local and national communities (Waisbord, 1988) as China fears?

The programmes supported by imported TV formats share the same standardisation and quality of content as other countries, however this cannot secure the success of a reality show. Especially in China, with its complex and strict media content regulation system, the localisation process and negotiation with government media policy is more crucial than the TV format itself in determining a show's success. Thus, format as a solution seems ideal for Chinese television industry to allow it to learn new technical skills from abroad and deploy them within its own cultural contexts. While copyright importation brings the concepts, ideas, management style and operational know-how from abroad, China's TV industry is still under pressure from government regulations and audiences.

TVoC comes with a production manual, or 'bible', which records every detail of the original TV programme, such as lighting, theatrical design, stage setting and even standards for choosing the contestants (Xinhua News, 2012). IPCN bought the format from Talpa for ¥3.5 million Yuan, and then sold it to Star Media and Zhejiang TV, the propaganda director of *TVoC*, Wei Lu, told the press. As an agency, IPCN translated the whole production 'bible' and also participated in the production process as an assistant, guiding the programme production, execution, marketing and other areas of operation. The producer of *TVoC* claims it shows respect to the original show as the 'bible' even has guidelines for choosing the four judges, stating that two top national stars, one judge liked by young people and a judge providing a tough live experience compared to the other three judges are required (Tian, Sun, and Chen, 2012). All the different versions of the programme share the same standard content, which makes *The Voice* a recognisable global brand; every television company

wanting to produce the show must pay a license fee for use of the owner's intellectual property.

As has been briefly mentioned in the introductory paragraph, Qu Jirong (2013), from Hunan University of Science and Technology, proposed the principles of the localisation process for imported formats, after making a comparison between the formats of *The Voice* (US) and *TVoC*. In the comparison, he argued that while in *The Voice* (US) the power is always in the hands of its audiences because the outcome is decided solely by a public vote, *TVoC* only gives such power to its four professional judges, plus 99 media practitioners (representatives from different media outlets) for the finale. Su Holmes (2004) has examined participation via phone voting, which for decades has been a staple process for UK TV talent shows such as in *Eden* (2002), *The Salon* (2003), *Big Brother* (2000), *Pop Idol* (2001) and *Fame Academy* (2002). She describes interactivity in reality television as primarily being conceived as operating at the level of software, but also involving viewers using new digital technologies (hardware) to cast their votes. Public voting, as an important aspect of interactivity in reality television in which industry gains profit, has been banned in mainland China since 2007, when SAPPRFT required all reality competition shows to 'cancel live broadcasting and reject using SMS voting and online voting' (Li, X., 2009). Although there is no public vote in *TVoC* and other reality shows in China, *TVoC* (2012) still had huge success in attracting TV audiences of 120 million and 400 million Internet users, as reported by Huanqiu News on 22 August 2012. In the next section of this chapter the success which Star Media as the production company achieved will be explored, together with an investigation of the other types of interactivity it designed and offered to its audiences.

Star Media responded to SAPPRFT in two main ways. First, though a new way of organising the collaboration between the production company (Star Media) and the TV station (Zhejiang satellite), which contributed greatly to the show's success. Both the record high ratings and the fact that the show was

popular right from its premiere have caused people to wonder what it is about this particular talent show that makes it stand out from many of the other similar programmes that appear on Chinese television. Looking back at China's TV broadcasting history, it is unprecedented for a production company and a TV station to form a partnership joint venture of this type, in which the parties share both the revenue and the risk (Ye, 2012). This meant that the Zhejiang TV station had to take on a greater amount of financial risk than had happened in China before, and this is the main reason why it took Star Media quite some time to find a network that was willing to cooperate.

Ye (2012) states that the usual way in which production companies and broadcasters work together in China is for the production company to handle the entire production process from scratch and for the broadcaster to simply make a decision about whether to broadcast the show. Based on the estimated advertising revenue and potential viewer ratings, broadcasters (TV networks) then have the power to determine how much they will pay for the programmes offered to them by producers. For the production company, there will be no further profit after receipt of a fixed production fee, no matter the amount of earnings generated by sales of advertising during the transmission of the show (Ye, 2012). When this process is examined it can be seen that this kind of cooperation model often forces production companies to skimp on production expenses at the cost of programme quality, in order to maximise their profits. In consequence, the quality of TV programmes has been reduced, and such practices could negatively influence the development of China's TV industry.

In contrast, in the new partnership model used in the case of *TVoC* (2012) Star Media and the Zhejiang satellite station shared the same risks. Star Media signed a valuation adjustment mechanism (VAM) with Zhejiang TV, whereby the producer and the network share both the risk and the potential rewards from a show (Fang, 2012). This agreement included the following stipulations on sharing advertising revenue: if audience ratings surpassed 2 per cent, advertising revenue would be shared in a ratio of 7:3, but if ratings did not

reach 2 per cent and advertising revenue was low, then the production costs of roughly ¥100 million were to be borne by Star Media alone (Liu, 2013). With this kind of motivational pressure, Star Media and Zhejiang TV bent over backwards to offer the best-possible show and related promotional campaigns. Star Media was in charge of costs for components from sound equipment, stage setting and audio post-production to coaches, bands and technicians, and Zhejiang TV put forth their best efforts in advertising sales to successfully seal a title sponsorship deal, worth ¥60 million, with a beverage company.

In China, judgement about the success of *TVoC* (2012) was mainly based on audience ratings, while in other countries this may not have been considered a key factor in relation to either social influences of the show or its commercial success. For instance, *The Voice UK*, which is broadcast by the BBC, encourages audiences to vote for their favourite artists by either voting from a land line phone or from their mobile, using Mobile Short Dial Codes, which are numbers called (not texted) from UK mobile phones where callers are charged a guaranteed fixed price for the call, regardless of their UK mobile network provider. MSDC numbers are shorter than normal telephone numbers, typically between 5 and 7 digits long.

The BBC FAQ page about voting indicates that callers from UK mobile phone networks pay the same charge to vote as callers from a BT landline – 25p for each vote for *The Voice UK* contestants with a minimum of 10p of this amount going to the charity the BBC Performing Arts Fund. The BBC itself does not receive any revenue from the calls. In the case of *TVoC* (2012), the provincial TV station, as the authorised broadcaster and network, shares the revenue earned with the production company.

The response and attitude of Star Media to the 'no public voting' regulations can be speculated upon from the perspective of the unique situation and motivational pressures present in the joint venture. What happened in China is that Chinese audiences did not know they would not be able to vote before the final competition date was c. On the 21st September 2012, Tencent

News said that 'tonight is the final competition of *TVoC*. The result is in the hands of the newly added 99 media practitioners (representatives from different media outlets as judges) instead of the four judges'. This indeed caused questions from, and discussion among, the public. Wei Lu, the advertising director of *TVoC,* explained to the press that 'We couldn't do a public vote as the original 'bible' (format) requires in mainland China because we have clear regulations on this. Hence, we decided to change the format to one that combines professional judgement from coaches and representations of ordinary audiences' tastes in determining the final result' (Wu, 2012). Lu's explanation led the public to think that *TVoC* (2012) had a better format than the original.

In fact, audiences' discussed this issue and their doubts about the fairness of the 30,000 live audience voting for the final competition, as well as showing their dissatisfaction with the live-audience-voting-only process. Also, they disagreed with the fact that only the host announced the result, without specifying the number of votes cast. Lu further explained this as a way, in accordance with the foreign practices, to protect the contestants' self-esteem and self-confidence (Jingjiang News, 2012). Zhejiang TV also came forward to claim their authority and fairness. It is not difficult to discover that the industry in fact had a strategic plan for dealing with the regulations on public voting issues in China. In cooperation with the provincial TV station, the joint efforts of the two sides the production company and the TV station) seems to have soon resolved the dissatisfaction and doubts of the audience.

3.4 Reshaping the relationship

As has been shown, *TVoC* (2012) caused heated discussions among audiences, particularly those communicating via the Internet. These discussions tell us that Chinese audiences did care about their right to vote, and that they wanted to know the details of the voting process. Not all Chinese audiences knew that voting was a part of the show in other regions, but among those who did, many

complained via the Internet about not having this option. Star Media, in cooperation with Zhejiang TV, needed to seek a new way of maintaining the idea of participatory audiences, despite the fact that they could not vote. Jian and Liu (2009) argued in their analysis of how the organisers and producers of *Super Girl* steered and manipulated audience participation that participatory audiences are symbolically paid using a form of 'dream-fulfilment' and are attracted by the apparent democracy that is displayed during these singing contests. 'Dream-fulfilment' and 'democracy' are the key offers which the industry gives to its audiences (Jian and Liu, 2009). Because Chinese audiences cannot vote freely during the show, the industry turns to creating 'dream-fulfilment' and 'democracy' by offering interactive opportunities through new media, especially by encouraging the use of Weibo. Unlike the UK reality show industry, which sells its shows with ideas such as '*You* decide!' (*Big Brother*), 'But this time *you* choose!' (*Pop Idol*) and 'If *you* want to have your say' (*The Salon*) (Holmes, 2004), Star Media uses the term 'interactivity' to attract audiences, meaning participation through social media interaction rather than through public voting.

In real social life, watching TV is not only a form of entertainment; it also gives people opportunities to get together with family and friends, to share their feelings and to enjoy social activities, with television continuously providing audiences with communication topics for them to respond to. Interactivity, simply speaking, includes seeking programme information, participating in the show, downloading videos and ringtones, posting on message boards, chatting with friends/fans, and subscribing to newsletters. As Holmes (2008) states, 'the core media channels through which interactive opportunities are offered are the conventional telephone, mobile phone, text messaging, digital TV and the internet'. In addition, the online viewing experiences of sharing and discussing on social media provided audiences of *TVoC* (2012) with further interactive opportunities. For instance, on 8 October 2012, the total number of those viewing *TVoC* (2012) online in mainland China

reached 1.3 billion; by the end of the final performance more than 1.1 billion topics/messages related to the show had been posted on the Tencent microblog website. As Jenkins (2002, p. 80) says, Chinese audiences are believed to be 'gaining greater power and autonomy as they enter into the new knowledge culture' and the new media market.

Use by audiences of social media platforms such as Sina Weibo was strongly encouraged among audiences of *TVoC* by its production company. The cooperation between *TVoC* (2012) and social media caused much discussion and debate among Chinese scholars and journalists. Writers believe that social media platforms such as Sina Weibo provide a potentially significant development in the understanding of audiences and their relationship with the media (Deller, 2011), bringing about convergence between 'old' and 'new' media and between 'producers' and 'consumers' (Jenkins, 2006a).

From 2005 to 2009, reality shows in China mainly provided audiences with 'interactivity' through text messaging, the conventional telephone, and online forums. Following Sina Weibo's emergence in 2009 it grew quickly, attracting hundreds of millions of users and penetrating into Chinese people's lives. According to the annual report of the CINIC (China Internet Network Information Center, 2012), the total number of Internet users in China reached 538 million by the end of June 2012, and Sina Weibo took over 30% of these.

Similarly to Twitter, Sina Weibo enables people to share short textual messages with others in the system (the maximum length of a message is 140 characters). Users can choose to follow people they know personally or celebrities and public figures, news alerts, businesses or simply people they think look interesting. Sina said in 2010 that more than 5,000 companies and 2,700 media organisations in China were using Sina Weibo (Wang, 2010).

In relation to reality shows, quantitative data from *Sina News* (Sina, 2012) reported that recent research from Sina had found that in China 20 per cent of respondents participated in reality shows via text messages and 6 per cent via telephone calls, while a much larger 72 per cent participated through

Weibo. Thus, it can be seen that Weibo occupies a very important position in current Chinese audiences' lives, as shown by the large percentage of Chinese viewers' who actually use Weibo. In addition, the reality television industry can use Weibo to obtain useful information, guide public opinion, and inspire viewers' desires (Li, 2014).

Exploring how Weibo work can aid understanding of how they are used by the TV industry to maintain participatory audiences. *TVoC* (2012) operated two main official microblog accounts on Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo. This reflects the current trend for TV programmes to operate official microblog accounts as a complement to television programme information, with audience members being encouraged to follow and interact with these accounts via programme websites and TV broadcasts. These accounts are active throughout the week, and they interact with viewers during the live shows, asking and answering questions and sometimes playing quizzes and games (Deller, 2011).

On the official Sina Weibo of *TVoC* (2012)*,* original posted information (including programme information, news announcements and videos) and reposted information (from other official or celebrity accounts) provided a space for users where they could participate through the activities such as 'Like', 'Repost' (Retweet), 'Save for later' (Favourite), 'Comment' (Reply) and 'Report'. The repost (like retweeting) can be understood both as a form of information diffusion and as a means of participating in a diffuse conversation (Deller, 2011), bringing users into a particular thread where they can engage without directly addressing it themselves (Boyd, 2010).

Weibo itself, as an interactive social media space, allows large numbers of people to participate, share and discuss. For example, on 30 September 2012, Chen Yao, a Chinese celebrity, wrote on her own Sina Weibo account, while she was watching the final competition of *TVoC,* 'Jike Junyi (contestant) sang brilliantly tonight, very touching. Actually she sings very well in every competition, she deserves to be named as "The Voice of China"' (Zhu and Yao, 2012). This message generated 4,651 comments and 3,561 Weibo users

reposted it, using the thread to talk about whether or not they liked Jike Junyi and their reasons. The divergence or consensus within those discussions and comments would then have been reviewed by followers of Chen Yao and themselves. Online social groups/communities were hence generated by users, based on their shared interests and ideologies. If it is posited that the SMS vote for *Super Girl,* to some extent, achieved democratic participation where everyone had one vote, Zhu and Yao (2012) argue that Chen Yao, with 25.93 million Weibo fans, in theory holds 25.93 million votes in the new media era. In this way, they also suggest Weibo can be seen as 'democratic' spaces. However, in this thesis the question of how much power audiences actually have will be addressed; while people can freely talk to each other on Weibo or back up the views of celebrities and authority figures, they still have no direct power over the show, either in determining the content or the results. What audiences do have is indirect power through following and joining online discussions, however it is hard to prove that the online discussions feed back to the show as either direct or indirect power.

So far, the official page of *TVoC* on Sina Weibo contains 8,117 officially published pieces of information and has 1,577,878 fans (followers). Weibo users can also follow particular topics by searching for and following messages containing keywords. From 13 July 2012 to 1 October 2012, the total number of messages on Sina Weibo about the term 'The Voice of China' reached 46,612,906 (Li, 2014). Quantitative statistics from Nianzhi.cc (a marketing and operations management tool for Sina Weibo) show that there were 149,685 reposts/sharings and 132,893 comments by followers of *TVoC's* official Weibo during August 2013. The simultaneous use of social media and smartphone apps while watching the show has given audiences more participatory platforms than previously existed, reshaping the relationship between audiences and *TVoC (2012)*.

To sum up, this chapter has examined how China's media regulations, politics and its television industry have impacted on the content localisation

process of *TVoC*. The purchased format of the original show *The Voice* was changed when it was broadcast to Chinese audiences. As the content of reality shows has been highly censored in mainland China since 2006, the producers of *TVoC* (2012) have had to follow the (new) regulations coming from SAPPRFT, both regarding the content of the show and the form of public voting. Standing as it does between government and audiences, the production company Star Media chose to cooperate with a state-owned TV station, sharing the risks and revenues, and working together to steer and manipulate audience participation because Chinese audiences cannot vote. Hence the use of the social media option of Weibo has been strongly encouraged in order to enable audience participation. By selling the notion of 'interactivity', the TV industry provided its fans and participants with a form of 'dream-fulfilment', 'democracy' and power. In addition, because of China's specific political regulations on reality television, under which audiences do not have the power to vote for their favourite contestant in determining competition results, Weibo, as so-called 'democratic' spaces, attract people accustomed to a communist regime to express themselves with a certain amount of apparent democracy, as displayed in the Weibo spaces.

However, as the government's censorship of Weibo becomes increasingly strict, a drop in Weibo users has been observed. A recent study by the *Telegraph,* which sampled the activities of 1.6 million Weibo users, found that activity had been dropping since late 2011, and had dropped precipitously in the autumn of 2013 (Custer, 2014). The *Telegraph*'s recent analysis shows a sharp drop after nearly every government incursion into Weibo's operations. For example, Weibo activity fell sharply when the Chinese government began a new crackdown on online rumours and in 2013 arrested several high-profile account holders, including Angel investor Charles Xue. Whether government censorship should be seen as responsible for the decreased interest in Sina's Weibo service cannot, so far, be evidenced. But the *Telegraph*'s observations about Weibo and government censorship indeed caused social debate in China.

Hence, this thesis proposes a hypothesis that, in reaction to government censorship and regulation, Chinese audiences will engage and interact differently with official (Sina Weibo) and unofficial (Baidu Forum) media platforms. Sections two (Chapters 5 and 6) and three (Chapters 7 and 8) of this thesis will test this hypothesis.

Chapter 4: *The Voice of China* (2012): participation and interactivity

'Consumers have become key participants in media culture; the debate now centres on the terms of their participation, not whether spectatorship is active or passive.'

– Henry Jenkins (2004)

'An individual who 'productively' responds to one media property, brand, or cause may be a 'passive' listener to many others; activity and passivity are not permanent descriptions of any individual.'

– Henry Jenkins (2013)

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter analysed how SAPPRFT's regulations and policies increasingly influenced the content and format of *TVoC* in 2012, as well as those of the Chinese television industry and media market as a whole. It demonstrated the significance of traditional television ratings in the case of *TVoC* (2012). Traditional television ratings, as Jenkins (2013) describes, represent the audience as the primary commodity exchanged through the practices of broadcast media. For Canxing Production, traditional television ratings are the decisive factor which determines its share of advertising profit with the television broadcaster Zhejiang Satellite Television.

In addition to its interest in traditional ratings, Canxing Production's concerns regarding audience engagement with *TVoC* can be identified in its promotional strategies and the narrative of the show. This is an example of what Jenkins (2013) describes as the engagement-based model for measuring the value of audience engagement. The industry now sees its audiences as a collection of active agents whose labour may generate alternative forms of market value, in that engaged audiences are more likely to recommend, discuss,

research, pass on, and even generate new material in response to the original product (Jenkins, 2013). According to Jenkins, viewed from this perspective the understanding of the measurement of audiences and their online participation during this transitional moment is:

> ... shaping by a series of competing frames: lurking versus legitimate peripheral participation; resistance versus participation; audiences versus publics; participation versus collaboration; hearing versus listening; consumers versus co-creators (Jenkins, 2013, p. 155).

To measure the value of audience engagement, the television industry must now not only focus on the traditional ratings system, but also on various formats that can provide direct audience connection.

To investigate such developments, this chapter discusses and analyses concepts and theories of audience engagement by addressing interactivity and participation in the case of *TVoC* (2012). Participation and interactivity are factors which have become increasingly visible in China with the phenomenal rise of reality television in recent years. As will be shown, participation in, and interactivity with, television programmes have been of increasing interest for both individual Chinese television producers and for the television industry as a whole. The first section of this chapter will discuss the definitions of the terms 'participation' and 'interactivity' as these terms are used in the Chinese television industry and in academic discourse.

Few studies have looked into the concepts of participation and interactivity as they have been recently adopted by the Chinese television industry, or at the differences between the two. Understanding the difference between participation and interactivity enables this chapter to analyse the ways in which Canxing Production used the pre-designed participation and interactivity aspects contained within the *TVoC* format as a significant promotional strategy before the show was broadcast. This section will explore various transmedia strategies that emerged as Canxing Production sought to attract and sustain the interest of active audiences, as a way of motivating the engagement of more casual viewers.

The second section analyses the weekly narrative of the first episode of *TVoC* (2012), focusing particularly on factors such as the narrative structure, editing, use of dialogue and voiceover, and 'characterisation' (such as contestants' personal stories). It aims to investigate how and when interactivity was embedded and foregrounded within the show. More importantly, by analysing the content of *TVoC* (2012), this chapter will determine when audiences participated, whom they are participated and interacted with and what effects such activities had.

While Chinese audiences could not vote in *TVoC* (2012), they were offered many 'interactive opportunities', as advertised and proclaimed by Canxing Production. A number of Chinese scholars have stressed the importance of providing audiences with 'interactivity' in television programmes, suggesting that the innovation of interactive models is one of the important strategies needed to improve the competitiveness of TV entertainment in the new media era (Song, 2009; Wang, 2014; Hu, 2012; Chen, 2011). It can be seen that powerful conglomerates are protecting their own interests as they enter the new media marketplace. In many Western countries, the focus on engagement is now central to the reconfiguration of audience power (Jenkins, 2013), meaning that audiences will gain greater power and autonomy as they become part of the new 'knowledge' culture.

To approach debates about audience power in the Chinese context, this chapter focuses on two major issues with regard to audiences' engagement with *TVoC* (2012). Firstly, how Canxing Production measured the value of audience engagement with reality television programmes, and secondly, the ways in which audiences engaged with *TVoC* (2012) on different platforms. Addressing the debates about the 'increasing power of audiences' (Jenkins, 2013; Hills, 2006), this chapter tries to question whether this is a ubiquitous phenomenon that can be applied to the Chinese context as well.

4.2 The concept of interactivity

Before analysing the interactive opportunities on offer for *TVoC* (2012), this chapter will discuss and explain the meaning of interactivity in the context of reality television. There is no simple and precise definition of the concept of interactivity in relation to new media, and without such a definition the concept can be too broad to be truly useful. In Chinese text, the term 互动 (hudong) is used in a similar way to the English word 'interactive'. Xinhua Dictionary literately defines '互动' as 'influencing each other' which is the same as the OED's definition of the English word. Professor Hu Yong, from Peking University, describes 'interactivity' as a key term in new media (Hu, 2012). Therefore in this study the English term 'interactivity' will be considered to be the equivalent of the Chinese term 互动 and will be used as such in relation to new media.

In terms of people's real social lives, watching TV is not only a form of entertainment; it also give people opportunities to get together with family and friends, to share their feelings, to enjoy warm social activities, and it continually provides audiences with topics they can respond to in a number of ways. Interactivities, simply speaking, include seeking programme information, participating in a show, downloading videos and ringtones, posting on message boards, chatting with friends and other fans, and subscribing to newsletters. However, the Chinese TV industry seems to confuse the words 'participation' and 'interactivity'. They have overused the term 'interactivity' in characterising aspects of their shows which encourage audiences to participate and get involved.

In her article 'But this time you choose!: approaching the interactive audience of reality television', Holmes (2004) reviewed this term 'interactivity' in relation to reality television and identified that, because it invariably spans both software and hardware issues, it has a range of potential meanings. She also points out that interactivity in reality television should not be simply

conceived as 'actual, physical interaction in the form of choices, decisions and communicative input to the system' (Holmes, 2004, p. 217) or 'the ability for message receivers to respond to message senders' (Jensen and Toscan, 1999, p. 15).

Reality television shows such as *TVoC* (2012), do indeed provided audiences with interactive opportunities using digital technologies; 'the physical cooperation of the audience' as Jensen and Toscan explain. Using this concept, interactivity between reality television and audiences is offered through the conventional telephone, mobile phones, text messaging, digital TV and the Internet, all of which means have been constantly updated by the progress of media technology development. In addition to these digital/new technology aspects, Holmes (2004) also adds ideological dimensions such as 'the idea of audience agency', 'the empowerment of users', and 'new liberties of action' (p.217). These build on Jensen and Toscan's (1999) assertion that interactivity 'represents a channel for the transfer of power and authority to the viewer' and thus alters the power relations between audience and text.

This ideology certainly suits most of the Western reality television examples, such as *Big Brother, Pop Idol, Fame Academy, The X Factor, The Voice UK, I'm a Celebrity, The Salon,* etc. Holmes (2004) indicates these reality programmes can be linked to a concept of interactivity that 'is generally seen to imply some sort of transformative relationship between the user of the media and the media form itself' (Marshall, 2004, p. 13) and 'allowed their consumers to feel involved in determining the nature of the text' (Griffen-Foley, 2004, p. 553).

Built upon this conceptualisation of 'interactivity', the notion of modifying content on reception seems to be very important in defining and discussing interactivity in relation to reality television. Interactive opportunities, as *TVoC* promised, could be discovered in the proliferation of new media formats which allow more participation. However, as long as audience 'feedback' could not become a crucial discourse in the text and the visual space,

the existence of so-called 'empowered' audiences should be questioned. In light of this shortfall in the reality of interactive engagement, the power of audience engagement with reality television in the current Chinese context should be questioned and explored.

4.3 Before the show: promotional strategies

This section explores *TVoC* (2012)'s pre-designed participatory and interactive opportunities. New media and technologies played an important role in the promotional process, and one month before the shows aired on 13 July 2012, the programme's promotional team launched a series of PR activities and advertising to 'warm up' audiences for its first season. Promotional events were held in 15 major cities across mainland China and the show did indeed get a certain amount of public and media attention, as the team expected (Souhu News, 2012). Then, following overwhelmingly positive reports from newspapers, magazines, radio, television and the Internet, Chinese audiences started to get a sense of what *TVoC* was about. Professional journalists in China contributed to spreading relevant information and at the same time also built audience suspense and appealed to them to participate.

Meanwhile, Canxing Production, in cooperation with well-known websites such as Sina.com, Sohu.com, Tencent.com, Youku.com and others, tried to maximise the programme-related information flow and spread on the Internet. Canxing Production operated two main official microblog accounts, on Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo, of which Sina Weibo had more users and greater social influence. According to the 2012 annual report of CINIC, the total number of Internet users in China reached 538 million at the end of June 2012, of which Sina Weibo had a share of over 30 per cent.

Canxing Production used Sina Weibo to build 'buzz' before shows aired in order to drive tune in during broadcasts, and to keep the buzz going by using the platform as a 'democratic space' where users would be free to discuss the

shows during and after airing. Weibo then offered the opportunity for fans to follow the official *TVoC* (2012) pages and create communities using hashtags (similar to those on Twitter), which then reminded audiences of the show throughout the days leading up to the next show. For instance, Weibo created a *#The Voice of China* hashtag to foster interest in the show before it aired. Fans could search the *#The Voice of China* feed on Weibo to see videos of the contestants and promotional celebrity footage of events that had happened during the weeks before the show, and they could engage with the show's content, by posting and commenting on reactions to the videos.

This engagement spread throughout many social groups. The result was that a great many people become emotionally invested in the performances because they had watched this big event approaching. People then wanted to tune in, particularly to watch the stars perform live during the show.

Another important aspect of the promotional activities of *TVoC* (2012) was the selection procedure for contestants. In the summer of 2012 *TVoC* set up an official online platform, voice.5ige.cn*,* where people could upload audition videos or audio files to access the opportunity to become a contestant. However, there is no evidence available showing that any contestant who attended this first season's auditions was selected from this platform. In fact, it was the directorial team of *TVoC* which chose contestants, in a short, intensive period leading up to the show being recorded. The activities of this team in relation to the selection procedure for contestants will be addressed in the next section.

In December 2012 Canxing Production announced their cooperation with Sohu.com, an organisation which assisted in the use of interactive functions of new media to get *TVoC* (2012) further promoted on the network platforms (Zhang, 2012). The two businesses decided to organise network channel selection of outstanding contestants who could go straight into the second season of *TVoC,* to be broadcast in 2013. Once individuals were chosen as contestants, they would have a chance to get their friends or families involved in the show as their support teams. This is evidence of the way

ordinary audiences were offered the chance of entering the narrative of the show and becoming a part of the text, but in a limited, controlled, and packaged way.

Canxing Production used new media technologies to enhance its programme promotion process and to attract public interest and engagement. *TVoC*'s page on Weibo could be seen as an open-to-all platform, including audiences, authorities and celebrities, while apps on smartphone and tablets were more like private platforms. In recent years, some TV-centric apps on smart phones and tablets have emerged as helping the industry to better understand viewers' interests in television programmes, and in enhancing the 'stickiness' between users and TV programmes and stations. Recent research by The Nielsen Company estimated that 41 per cent of tablet owners and 38 per cent of smartphone owners use their devices at least once a day while watching television (Nielsen, 2012). Known as the 'second screen', a device such as an iPad or smartphone can supplement and augment what audiences see on TV, and this suggests that TV-centric apps indeed meet the demands of consumers. Canxing Production created the official *TVoC* app which adds complementary features to existing TV-centric apps.

There are in total 71 relevant apps for *TVoC* in the Apple Store and 85 apps in Google Play (Xinhua Net, 2013). Although most of them seem to be 'copycats' of each other, they do provided audiences with mass information flows related to *TVoC*. In 2013 the Canxing Production set up its official app of TVoC and provided users with updated information, news and videos for five reality shows, *The Voice of China* (2013), *Kuwo Zhen Shenyin* (2013), *Entertainment Dreamworks* (2013), *Wulin Zhengba* (2013), and *Wuchu Wo Rensheng* (2013). This app also offers users live broadcast viewing of these shows and allows them to comment on each programme and share their thoughts and feelings. The official app of *TVoC* allows its users to check in to the show that they are watching and see what others are watching at the same time. It asks its users to vote for their favourite contestants, and it also allows

them to predict the competition results and to enter a free prize draw. Additionally, users can share what they have seen while using the app as well as jokes, and criticisms of Weibo and other social media, such as Tencent Wechat.

Another social media app which can be compared to Weibo is Tencent's Wechat, also known as Weixin in Chinese. This is a more private space where users' posts are used with more intimacy to share text, images, and short voice messages. Weixin was launched in January 2011 and quickly amassed about 400 million registered users. It is similar to WhatsApp, TalkBox, LINE, Facebook and Kakaotalk, but is more of an aggregator of the existing services of various social networking tools: part Facebook, part Instagram, part walkie-talkie and part subscription service. A person's posts are visible only to 'accepted' friends, and the kinds of information shared – photos of one's children or random observations about the day – are typically intended only for a defined circle of friends and family. Publicly 'tagging' friends in photos and posts, which is one of Facebook's signature functions, does not exist in Weixin; instead, what appears in your timeline is entirely controlled by the account holder.

Unlike Weibo, Weixin is used almost exclusively on Internet-enabled mobile devices, not desktops (Larson, 2013). This new media technology is becoming more important and appealing to the television producers and the industry. Before the show aired, *TVoC* built up its '*gongzhong hao*' (public account) on Weixin through which audiences were encouraged to subscribe to its daily news about the show and related information. This account also offered a link to the show's Weibo account. Users could share news and information from *TVoC's gongzhong hao* to their *'pengyou quan'* (friends circle), choosing which of their friends they did or did not want to be included. Along with supplying information, this *gongzhong hao* offered users three dimensions of participation: *'hudong'* (interactivity), *'chaoji tiyan'* (super experience) and *'wei huodong'* (small events). To be more specific, *hudong* included a link to

'wei shequ' (community) and 'wei shi' (video of the show); *chaoji tiyan* links to other media platforms such as Sina Weibo, Tencent Video and Xiami Music; and *wei huodong* provides connection to smartphone games and raffles. In considering these opportunities, which were offered to audiences by Canxing Production as 'interactivity', it is posited that the company actually used Weixin to offer information and participatory opportunities, rather than genuine interactivity.

As a whole, the promotion process before the show aired was staged by the media from the very beginning to attract attention, with fans and commentators all contributing to boosting the hype, and this activity can be seen to have reinforced the concentration of power in the hands of the media, rather than with the audience.

4.4 Participatory opportunities within the weekly narratives

This section explores how Chinese audiences were encouraged to engage with those participatory and interactive opportunities in the weekly narratives of *TVoC* (2012) which were put in place as part of Canxing Productions' pre-designed promotional strategies. Su Holmes' (2004) work on *The Salon* provides a good example of the analysis of the interactivity featured within television programmes. As part of this investigation the contexts pertaining both before and after the show was broadcast are also relevant, and are crucial in understanding audience engagement and power. This section will explore what participation and interactivity opportunities were encouraged within the narratives, together with researching the points at which people were encouraged to get involved, both during and after the show. Even more importantly, the objects of the audiences' interactions will be explored.

In comparison to reality shows such as *The Salon, Big Brother* and *Pop Idol, TVoC* (2012) offered very limited interactive opportunities to its audiences. As discussed previously, general audience voting had been cancelled as a result

of government requirements, and so it seems that only a limited number of people were given the right to vote in the final of *TVoC* (2012). The audience-voting format adopted granted the audience an apparent say in who deserved to gain celebrity status (Hellmueller and Aeschbacher, 2010, p. 21). In the final show of *TVoC* (2012), the result of the competition depended on the total number of votes from two groups of people: 30,000 audience members present at the live show and one media practitioner representing each of 99 media outlets. Consequently, power was not actually in the hands of audiences, because the voting process and outcomes were not fully available to viewers within the show's narrative.

How then were screen audiences who were unable to vote encouraged to participate in *TVoC* (2012)? Canxing Production offered two main participatory opportunities: the presenter and the rolling titles. The first episode of *TVoC* aired on 13 July 2012 on Zhejiang TV in a prime evening slot, from 7.30 p.m. to 10 p.m. Official news sources reported that the shooting of *TVoC* (2012) started on the evening of July 4th 2012 at Shanghai Pudong University stadium (Meng, 2012). In fact, the whole project had started several months earlier. Wangyi Entertainment reported that, in contrast to other reality talent shows, such as *Super Girl*, *TVoC* had no mass auditions. Instead, Canxing Production set up a directorial team which sought contestants and so-called 'good voices'. Lu Wei, the publicity director of *TVoC*, revealed that this team contained one director and three assistant directors, and that each assistant director had a group of more than a dozen sub-directors working for them.

The group as a whole was divided into two main sub-groups: the online group and the offline group. The online group was mainly responsible for looking for good voices on popular music web sites, music enthusiasts' bulletin boards (BBs) and in online communities; the offline group played the role of 'star hunters', searching for talent at music schools, bars, and even enterprise ensembles and community arts organisations. It is therefore the case that all the contestants who were took part in the blind auditions had, in fact, been pre-

selected by the directorial team. Despite this, taking the first episode of *TVoC* (2012) as an example, audiences were encouraged to participate and it was even suggested that they could become contestants:

> Tonight, at this stage, we will start a war about music, we are looking for a real singing genius; is that you? (Shao Hua).

> We are looking for the most incredible singing talent; we are looking forward to finding a good voice on this stage.

Shao Hua, the presenter of *TVoC* (2012), made these statements at the beginning of the first show. In contrast to *The Voice UK,* which has two presenters (one female and one male) who put a huge amount of passion and enthusiasm into the intensive atmosphere of the show, Hua was mainly in charge of introducing the interactivities on offer and the commercial advertising. He repeatedly highlighted the purpose of the show and reminded audience of its watching focus. In addition, he also said:

> If you get the approval of three or more coaches you can win a ¥10,000 music dream-fund provided by Suning Yigou.

Here, Hua used the term 'you' to include both the contestants and the screen audiences. In offering a ¥10,000 fund, he called upon audiences to participate by signing up for the competition. However, in reality audiences would never be given a chance to be on screen or in the text of the show. This 'hook' provided audiences with a promise of both participation and interactivity which was, in fact, illusory. According to Janet Murray (2010), interactivity can be both procedural and participatory. Murray (2010) also argues that for something to be interactive it must be participatory. In this situation audiences could physically participate with the show through sending text messages, as presenter Hua directly called on them to do:

> By sending a supporting text message 'A+contestant'X to 10669588298, you will have the chance to receive a ¥50 coupon offered by Suning Yigou.

Beside this direct appeal for participation from the presenter, other information passed to the audience through the format of rolling titles. When playing the background story of the contestants, there were intermittent titles

'follow voice.5ige.cn' showing under the contestants' names, reminding audiences that they could access more information through the official website of *TVoC* (2012). The most frequent words on the rolling titles would be 'participate in the SMS interactive of *The Voice of China*'; 'follow the official Sina Weibo of *TVoC';* 'leave comments @ *The Voice of China';* 'leave a message to support your favourite contestants'; 'check the official website of Zhejiang TV www.zjstv.com,'; 'the official website of *The Voice of China* is *'*voice.5ige.cn' and 'get to know more about things behind the scenes'. These clear, brief statements showing repeatedly to audiences provided information outside the show itself and called people to participate, but did they constitute an interactive platform between audiences and screen where they could communicate and interact?

The rolling titles asked audiences to participate in the show through other medias, such as Sina Entertainment, Tencent, Baidu News, Wangyi Entertainment, Renren, Fengxing, PPTV, Tianya forum, Xunlei Kankan, Miduole and Kuwo Music. Some of these media platform are social media websites (e.g. Renren), some are online news websites (Sina Entertainment, Tencent, Baidu News, Wangyi Entertainment), while some are digitalised watching platforms (Fengxing, PPTV, Xunlei Kankan) and Kuwo Music is a platform offering free online music listening and legitimate download services. This activity represents technological media convergence, as described by Jenkins, in that there is technological fusion and producers marketing a text across a range of media platforms (Jenkins, 2006).

The official website (voice.5ige.cn) also offered a ringtone (singing by contestants) download service which allowed audiences to simultaneously explore and download the music they liked from the show to their mobiles. Again, this is evidence of media convergence, this time between *TVoC* (2012) and the music industry.

Jenkins also examines cultural convergence, a term referring both to the ways in which audiences may relate to the media culture and the meaning-

making strategies which arise from such activities (Jenkins, 1998). As Holmes indicated, it is difficult to clearly distinguish media and cultural convergence, as they are processes which are fundamentally interlinked (Holmes, 2004).

In *TVoC* (2012), the results of audience feedback were also played out through the rolling titles. The production team would select which comments, feedback and opinions from audiences' text messages should appear in the rolling titles. Most of the feedback appeared to have come from Sina Weibo, taking the form of a user's nickname plus the content of their comment. The selected comments on screen were shown to audiences briefly and using a small font. In the first episode of *TVoC* (2012), about 40 audience feedback items were shown in the rolling titles, such as:

> @ Baijiaxiaoxian: @ *The Voice of China.* Wish to see really good singers. Don't let us down. Oh, I have always liked Zhejiang TV's... fighting!

> @ Shuishoumange: @ Zhejiang TV @ *The Voice of China.* It's finally begun, really looking forward to seeing this!

> @ Houmanman: watching @ *The Voice of China.* This copyright programme feels good. The opening contestant was very impressive.

None of these expressed a negative attitude about the programme or Zhejiang TV and so it seemed that all viewers were looking forward to seeing the show. Along with comments on the programme itself, positive audience feedback about the contestants and the four judges was also displayed:

> @Yiouwen: I haven't seen such a good show for a while, the wisdom of Huan Liu, lovely personality of Ying Na, the passion of Chengqin Yu and the tears of Kun Yang; makes me feel real. Zhejiang TV offers us such good and clear voices!

> @Lijinhuobuyaotaichongdong: love Yong Huang's voice and his love for his girlfriend, so touching!

It is not the intention of this research to comment on the authenticity and content of this audience feedback or the opinions contained, but rather to use it as evidence for the claim of there being only limited interactivity within the weekly narrative, as previously presented in this section. It can be said that the selected participations and audience feedback items used did not impact on

what audiences saw in the show, despite the fact that they looped back into the rolling titles of the show. Interactivity in the case of *TVoC* (2012) did not appear to imply some sort of transformative relationship between the user of the media and the media form itself (Marshall, 2004), nor did it allow consumers of the show to feel involved in determining the nature of the text (Griffen-Foley, 2004). Content creators were still the sole determiners of programming objectives and outcomes. The use of new technologies relating to television programmes created a wider arena for participation and interactivity beyond the show itself, but these activities were not capable of disturbing the power hierarchy between the Chinese government, the TV industry and the audiences of the show.

4.5 Social media: Sina Weibo

There is little evidence in *TVoC* (2012) of the products of interactivity being exploited in the service of an ongoing narrative for televisual consumption; the pre-selected audience feedback and opinions discussed above had limited impact on what was seen on the screen. However, this lack of genuine audience impact seemed to have had no effect on the popularity of the show. Statistics show that *TVoC* (2012) attracted 120 million TV viewers and 400 million Internet viewers following its first airing in July 2012. As at 8 October 2012, the total number of the online video viewings of *TVoC* (2012) had reached 1.3 billion in mainland China; as at the end of the final performance, there had been more than 1.1 billion topics/messages related to the show posted on Weibo. The online viewing experience, sharing and discussions on social media and the use of relevant apps on smart phones and tablets together provided audiences with a wider participatory platform. Chinese scholar Yang Zhirong (2013) suggests that new media is one of the most significant factors in the success of *TVoC* (2012). He particularly mentions Sina Weibo, which has become a crucial platform for helping to promote the programme. It is also believed that social

media such as Sina Weibo provides a potentially significant development in our understanding of audiences and their relationship with media (Deller, 2010), and of the convergence between old and new media and between producers and consumers (Jenkins, 2006).

Sina Weibo works in a similar way to Twitter. It is a China-based microblog site, and is one of the most popular sites in China, used by well over 30 per cent of Internet users. It enables people to share short textual messages with others using the site (the maximum length of a message is 140 characters). Users can choose to follow people they know personally, as well as celebrities and public figures, news alerts, businesses or simply people they think look interesting. More than 5,000 companies and 2,700 media organisations in China use Sina Weibo. Nowadays, the TV industry operates official Weibo accounts as complements to its programmes, providing information which audience members are encouraged to follow and interact with via the programme websites and during TV broadcasts. These accounts are active throughout the week between transmissions of shows, and they also interact with viewers during the live shows, allowing them to ask and answer questions and sometimes to quizzes and games (Deller, 2010). So far, the official page of *TVoC* on Sina Weibo has published 11,085 pieces of information and has 1,859,626 fans (followers) (Sina Weibo, 2014).

On the official Weibo of *TVoC,* original post information (including programme information, news announcements, videos) and repost information (from other official or celebrity accounts) is provided to users allowing them to then participate through activities such as 'like', 'repost (retweet)', 'save for later (favourite)', 'comment (reply)' and 'report'. The repost can be understood as both a form of information diffusion and as a means of participating in a diffuse conversation (Dellar, 2010), which would bring new users into a particular thread where they can engage, without directly addressing the originator (Boyd, 2010). Reposting is also a way users can engage with others (friends, celebrities) while getting messages out to new audiences.

As well as the actions detailed above, Weibo users can also follow particular topics by searching for keywords. From 13 July 2012 to 1 October 2012, the total number of messages on Sina Weibo relating to #The Voice of China reached 46,612,906 (Zhu and Yao, 2012). As an example, on 30 September 2012, Chen Yao, a Chinese celebrity, wrote on her own Sina Weibo account while she was watching the final competition of *TVoC (2012)*:

> Jike Junyi (contestant) sings brilliantly tonight, very touching. Actually she sings very well in every competition, she deserves to be called 'The Voice of China'.

A total of 3,561 Weibo users then reposted this message and it generated an additional 4,651 comments, in which users talked about and discussed whether or not they liked Jike Junyi and the reasons for their views. The divergence or consensus within these discussions and comments would then have been picked up by followers of Chen Yao and of each reposting user. From observing this trail of posts, reposts and comments it can be seen that online social groups and communities are generated by users, based on their shared interests and identities.

What makes the discussion of television programmes on Weibo particularly interesting is that audiences used Weibo while they watched *TVoC (2012)*. Quantitative statistics from Nianzhi.cc (a marketing and operations management tool for Sina Weibo) show that there were 149,685 reposts/shares and 132,893 comments by followers of *TVoC's* official Weibo during August 2013. Here the notion of 'liveness' arises, that is, live transmission offering a potential connection to shared social realities as they are happening (Couldry, 2004a). Couldry identifies two forms of liveness: online and group (Couldry, 2004b). Relating to the Weibo phenomenon, liveness refers to a group of friends who are in continual contact via their mobile phones through calls, texting, social media, and apps. In terms of TV Technology, new research from Accenture (2015) reveals that people use social media while watching TV to:

- obtain more information about a show, product or service

- apply for coupons and promotional codes
- enter contests and lotteries
- watch another video
- interact with others who share similar interests
- share/recommend the video/programme being watched
- make a purchase

This has highlights the situation of audiences use social media to directly interact with television content while watching live series programmes across multi-screens.

While Western scholars have already started to examine the potential problems that the liveness of Twitter can cause for viewers following and contributing to discussions about a programme (Deller, 2010), Chinese discourse talks about such aspects of Weibo in a more positive way, by emphasising the benefits of the interactive function, and appealing to media companies to use Weibo extensively in TV shows (Yang, 2013). Chinese scholars Zhu and Yao, in analysing the interactive transmission process of *TVoC* (see below), point out that the show provides its audiences with basic information and content through traditional media – the TV – as a one-way transmission process (Zhu and Yao, 2012). They then suggest that *TVoC* creates for itself a focused communication tool, by inviting public opinion leaders (celebrities) to participate in online discussions in order to create trending topics on Weibo.

This type of activity enables messages and links to be circulated to millions of users within a matter of minutes. Furthermore, Zhu and Yau argue that *TVoC* on the Weibo platform is, to a certain extent, a 'live show'. The onscreen content is, in fact, providing nothing but the background information and sources for audiences' online discussions on Weibo, and that Weibo offers them a platform on which they can participate, by producing content and interpreting text (Zhu and Yao, 2012). Their argument is similar to Couldry's idea of liveness in seeing reality shows as live events with audiences watching at the same time but in different locations (Couldry, 2004).
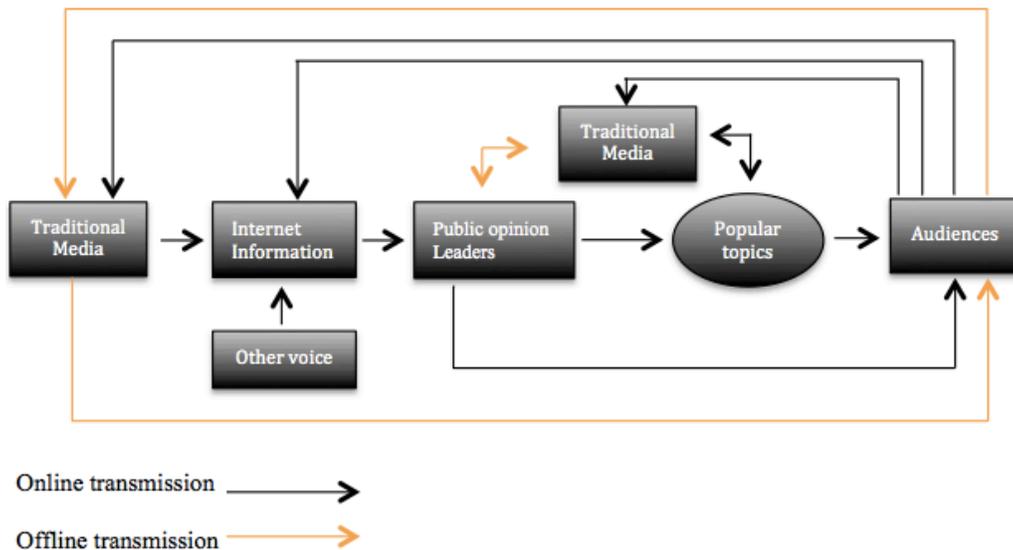
Figure 1. Interactive transmission process of *TVoC*

In Zhu and Yao's exposition of the interactive transmission process of *TVoC,* they explain the ways in which public figures and celebrity opinion leaders (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955) and the official accounts of media organisations exert influence within the 'Weibosphere'. The interest of this present research is to investigate the influence of audience (fans/Weibo users) participation in shaping the narrative and content of *TVoC* (2012), in contrast to and in addition to the influences discussed above.

The following situation which occurred in *TVoC* (2012) provides a good example of Weibo discussions affecting what is seen onscreen. Xu Haixin, a female contestant from Chengdu, sang a song called 'Self' in the first episode of *TVoC* (2012). Her explanation of why she chose to sing this song – 'to continue my dead father's music dream' – moved the judge Huan Liu to tears, and he was then chosen to be her tutor for the show. Her clean, innocent appearance and her touching story led press commentators to discuss her in a very positive way after the blind audition.

However, some Internet users soon found out that Xu was lying in her touching story about singing for her dead father. Xu was suspected of using her father's death to gain sympathy and to 'hype' herself, as she did in another talent show *HuaErDuoDuo* (Qinhai TV) one month before *TVoC* (2012). The fans on Weibo suspected that Xu's withdraw from *HuaErDuoDuo* was due to her participation in *TVoC (2012)*. Eventually, these rumours and comments annoyed the makers of *HuaErDuoDuo*. On 18 July 2012, they posted a declaration on the programme's official Weibo page to clarify the reason Haixin Xu gave on 16 June 2012 to their production team about her withdraw from the show:

> Xu sent us a video to tell us that she had just received news that her grandfather was critically ill, and her grandmother had collapsed (Weibo, 2012).

In addition, *HuaErDuoDuo* uploaded the video that Xu sent to the production team. 1,826 Weibo users reposted this video and 610 users commented on it, including:

> @LongleLulu: @The Voice of China. Please let her out now! Who knows who's the next person to die in her family: her aunt, uncle, sister, brother? She sings well, but without a sincere heart, she is very vulgar, garbage, disgusting…

Following this, more users began to dig into her past and pictures of her with dyed yellow hair, a sexy nightclub image, in love with 43-year-old man when she was 23 years old etc. began to be posted. As a whole, it can be said that the effort from Internet users destroyed Xu's public image and credibility. Then, on 24 August 2012, in episode 7, Haixin made the following statement before the competition:

> There was a lot of controversy about me after the previous show. No matter whether they were positive or negative, they gave me power to progress forward.... Tonight, at this stage in the competition, I will leave everything behind, and just focus on the next song. I'm myself. I'm happy and strong.

As one of the top four contestants in Huan Liu's team, Haixin Xu was eliminated, with only 28 votes from the 99 media practitioners, while Yawei

Yuan received 83 votes and Jike Junyi 93. Then Huan Liu, Zu's tutor, explained her elimination as follows:

> Please listen to me: Haixin is a professional contestant who has been studying music and singing for many years... and at this time, as we all know, there were too many other factors that influenced the impression she gave and her image…

In saying there were too many other factors, Liu was referring to the discussions and disputes on Weibo and the Internet about Xu's personal stories. What he said on the show was an appeal to general audiences in which he tried to call for sympathy and toleration for Xu. In this respect, it can be seen that audiences were gaining greater power and autonomy as they entered into the new knowledge culture and the new media market, as described by Jenkins (2002). Their opinions had huge social influences that could loop back to the show and even affect the result of the competition. In the case of *TVoC* (2012), it was not the ability to vote on the text of the show, or the proliferation of intertextual sites around it, that constituted this influence, it was the social media options available which gave audiences the power to interact with TV. When audiences watched *TVoC* (2012), they were not interacting with the show and its production team. Instead, they were participating in online discussions and interacting with other audiences including celebrities and fans.

4.6 Participation as consumption

In mainland China, it was felt that Canxing Production used *TVoC* (2012) as the starting point for it to reform and build up a music industry chain, and perhaps as an even a bigger strategy than this. In other versions of *The Voice,* the relationship between contestants and the show was terminated after the season finale. The company behind the show did not have anything to do the contestants' future singing careers. However, in China, Canxing Production took a longer view. From their perspective, the production and broadcasting of *TVoC* was simply the first step.

After the show broadcast, various strategies were used, such as music concerts and films relating to *TVoC* (2012), to extend the show into Chinese audiences' everyday lives, allowing them to continue to engage with it. In relation to *TVoC* (2012), participation as consumption happened not only between Chinese audiences and the on-air shows, or among Internet users, but also among related transmedia events. Marshall points out that the term 'interactivity' has been overused by the new media industries in order to sell the distinctiveness and value of their new technologies, to the point where interactivity seems to represent little more than 'hyperbole, hucksterism and hype' (Marshall, 2004, p. 13). From this point of view, this section explores how Canxing Production provided participatory opportunities after the show as part of their money-making strategies by providing audiences with participation as consumption. Eileen R. Meehan suggests that economic dimensions, such as corporate structures, market structures and interpenetrating industries, must be added to analyses of the media generally, if the texts and intertexts of mass culture are to be fully understood (Meehan, 1991).

The corporate structure of Canxing Production and Star Media China will now be examined. Canxing Production (also known as Starry Production) is the professional production company under Star China International Media Ltd. (Star China Media, SCM), which has produced a variety of the most popular TV programmes in China, including *TVoC, China's Got Talent* and *So You Think You Can Dance*. Star Media China is known as a leading media entertainment group in China, with business interests ranging from TV production, broadcasting, filmmaking and artist management, to music and concert production. It was 53 per cent owned by China Media Capital (CMC), which was set up in 2009 as the country's first culture-focused private equity fund. CMC operates three 24-hour Mandarin channels – Xing Kong International, Xing Kong Chinese and Channel [V] Chinese – covering Hong Kong, Macau and Southeast Asia.

The Shanghai city government's Shanghai Media Group controls 32.5 per cent of CMC, and other major shareholders include the state-run China Development Bank, as well as China Merchants China Direct Investments Ltd., which is also controlled by the state-owned China Merchant Group. As of January 2014, CMC acquired the remaining 47 per cent share from 20th Century Fox and thus became the sole owner of Star China Media Ltd, a highly concentrated and integrated media conglomerate. CMC is operated by Li Ruigang, who also heads the Shanghai Media Group, one of the more entrepreneurial state-owned film and TV groups. Li has been working at the Shanghai Media Group since 1994, is very familiar with Chinese government policies and the political environment, and is particularly interested in participating in the Chinese government's media industry reform project. He had for some time been exploring ways to set up separate production and broadcasting businesses for TV shows. It can be said that Star Media China, under Li's leadership, is a for-profit corporation, but one which closely follows the central government's regulations and policies promoting positive energies and images.

In January 2012, new rules from SAPPRFT took effect, limiting the air time allowed for game, talk, and talent shows, thus requiring the nation's local government-owned broadcasters to put more emphasis on news. The state newspaper Global Times said the SAPPRFT also required more shows aimed at building morality and prompting the core values of socialism (Zhao, Shen and Tan, 2012). As a consequence, *TVoC* has developed into a cultural phenomenon which extends beyond the show and its commercial activities and events.
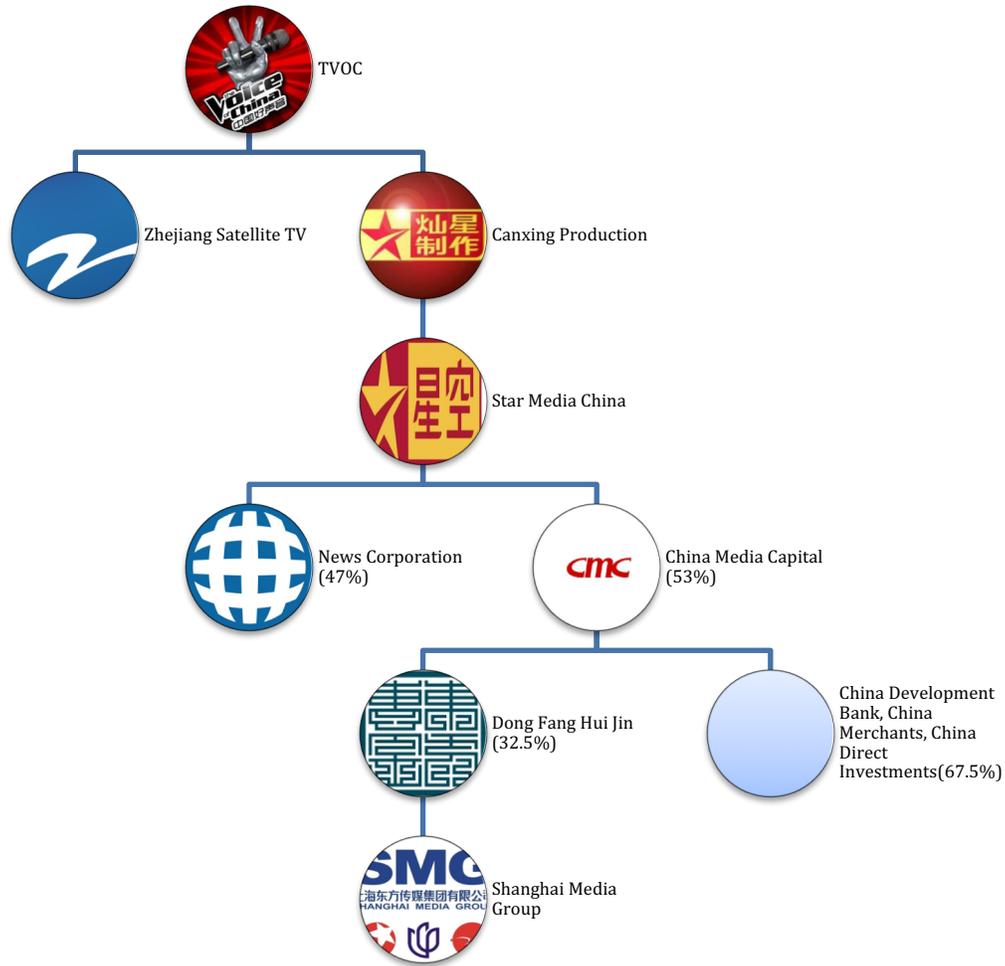
Figure 2. Corporate structure of the production of *TVoC*

In the digital era, extra footage on digital channels, trailers, exclusive clips and messages, previews, pre/sequels, spinoffs, adaptations and spoilers, and in fact every event/fact surrounding reality shows, can be sent to audiences through both old and new media options. In relation to *TVoC* (2012) Canxing Production produced additional programmes for its audiences. *TVoC* was broadcast every Friday night from 9:15 p.m. Afterwards, a related reality show which had been produced by Canxing Production, *Ku Wo Zhen Sheng Yin (2012,)* was broadcast as a sequel to *TVoC* (2012). This was a talk show interviewing contestants from *TVoC* (2012) who were the current subjects of social media discussions and public concerns. The whole programme only

lasted about ten minutes after the first broadcasting of *TVoC* (2012) every Friday on Zhejiang TV. But the full version lasting about 20–30 minutes was sold to and exclusively broadcast on Iqiyi.com, a digital video platform in China. Contestants who appeared in this show became minor celebrity figures, sharing their personal feelings and stories with audiences, and providing consumption which may or may not have been at odds with predicted interpretive strategies of the main show's audiences (Gray, 2010).

At the same time, audiences were encouraged to access additional information and footage on the Internet. Chinese scholar Li Xiang sees this as a complementary relationship between *TVoC* and Iqiyi.com, using advanced network technology such as sharing, commenting and reposting to build up a virtuous cycle focusing on user interests (Li, 2009). In cooperation with media industry players, such as digital media companies and Internet protocol TV providers, Canxing Production offered its audiences participatory opportunities through the production of their own materials that expanded audiences' understanding of both the text and the franchise.

In 2014, Canxing Production created, and China's national TV channel CCTV-3 aired, the first original, native Chinese talent show format, *Sing My Song,* with the slogan 'looking for the best original songs in China'**.** The series first aired on CCTV-3 in January 2014, with a finale on 21 March 2014, earning a total season viewership of 480 million and a total viewer share of 37 per cent in China (data from CSM media research). CCTV-3's ratings increased by 59 per cent compared to the previous year, for the same time slot (Starchinapress.com, no date). More recently, Star China Media bought the format of the American musical comedy-drama TV series, *Glee,* from Twentieth Century Fox Television International Distribution, and the Chinese version of the show is currently under production by Canxing Production. The success of *TVoC* (2012) has allowed Canxing Production to produce more reality shows, such as *TVoC* (2013), *Sing My Song* and the Chinese version of *Glee* and all are positively disseminating cultural values where these indeed

115

meet the central government's requirement of shows building morality and prompting and supporting the core values of socialism.

As has been suggested, Star Media China operates *TVoC* as a cultural phenomenon, extending music and music events, such as new albums, music concerts, films and commercial performances, to various cities and venues and into people's lives. Jenkins describes this as 'media convergence', implying technological fusion and/or producers marketing a text across a range of media platforms. In contrast, 'cultural convergence' refers to the ways in which audiences may relate to media culture and the meaning-making strategies which arise, with convergence occurring within the minds of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others, according to a new set of rules that no one involved actually fully understands (Jenkins, 2006). In general, Star Media China's cooperation with the music industry has produced things such as new albums, music concerts, commercial performances and legitimate music downloads. After the first season of *TVoC,* the first step in this direction taken by Canxing Production was to release an album of *TVoC,* made up of the most popular songs sung by contestants from the show. Meanwhile, there were accompanying releases of compilations of new creative music from the four judges/coaches: Liu Huan, Na Ying, Yang Kun, and Harlem. Then some contestants (Li Daimo, Ding Ding, Quan Zhendong, Zhang Wei, Duo Liang) quickly released their new music albums and some (Xu Haixin, Yuan Weiya, Jike Junyi, Jin Zhiwen) released EPs. Audiences and fans bought these new albums and EPs in huge numbers during a depressed economic period for record companies.

From December 2012 to the Spring Festival of 2013, ten nationwide tour concerts of *TVoC* were staged. Interestingly, these concerts also followed the format of the show, with the original four judges/coaches as leaders of four teams, with audiences being offered opportunities to vote for the best team and singer after each concert. This format indeed enhanced the interaction between the audiences and the stage, and between the concerts and the celebrities. In

116

addition, a world tour concert of *TVoC* was also planned for the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Hong Kong, in response to enthusiastic requests from audiences and fans.

Some contestants quickly became famous after the show and staged their own personal concerts. For instance, the 25-year-old singer Jike Junyi, who won the third place in the first season of *TVoC* in the summer of 2012, held her first concert in Beijing on 23 March 2014. Rising stars like Jike Junyi staging their own concerts inevitably became topics of public discourse and focuses for further audiences' involvement.

To ensure fan attendance and participation, Star Media China also released a movie spin-off during the Christmas season, on 27 December 2013, entitled '*The Voice of China: Turns Around for You*', produced by Canxing Production. The film brought together contestants from the first and second seasons in a warm and uplifting story about a group of young, aspiring singers. It was further released in January 2014 in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia, as the show had been closely watched and followed by many audiences outside China for the preceding two years. However, this film was a failure, with only ¥3 million of box office takings for an investment cost of ¥850 million, and this suggests that Chinese audiences do not blindly consume programme derivatives.

Most cultural production in the United States is done by private, for-profit corporations and, as Meehan has examined, corporate imperatives operate as the primary constraints shaping the narratives and iconography of the text, as well as the manufacture and licensing of intertextual materials (Meehan, 1991). However in mainland China, private ownership of television channels is prohibited, meaning that state broadcasters such as CCTV are the official outlets for all private productions. In order to have programmes shown via state television, private production corporations usually closely follow advice from the TV stations, from initial brainstorming sessions to develop ideas, right through to production. This process has, in fact, constituted the main

mechanism of content control in China. In another words, the Chinese government and its policies have influence in shaping the narratives and iconography of the text and the intertexts of *TVoC* through their regulation of the TV stations. An example of this type of influence is SAPPRFT's agreement to allow the broadcasting of the reality television show, *Happy Boy,* in 2007 by Hunan Satellite TV, with a specific requirement for the station to provide pre-designed public service content within the show. Although there was no clear requirement from the SAPPRFT for *TVoC* (2012) to provide public service content, Canxing Production and Star Media China seek to maintain a good relationship with the government and claim themselves to be good cultural players, and not just commercial producers. Besides the commercial activities Canxing Production offers, it also provides many public service and charitable activities and educational events for its audiences.

On November 23rd 2012, *San Ya International Beach Music Festival* was held by Canxing Production at San Ya, a popular tourist resort in Hainan Province, which attracted music lovers from across the country. The music festival invited tutors and singers from *TVoC* to perform, following the same format as the show. Two professional entertainment agencies owned by Star Media International Media Co. Ltd. were responsible for this event. As one of the major organisers, Star China Media claimed that the aim was to make this music festival a top-level music feast for Chinese audiences (Starmediapress.com, no date). Sun Su, minister of the San Ya Publicity Department, announced that this cooperation with Canxing Production was aimed at developing San Ya as a base for the creation of original music, a cutting-edge pop music publishing platform, a music products trading centre, and the vacation destination for musicians.

Contestants from *TVoC* (2012) were also encouraged to engage in charitable activities, again through Canxing Production's arrangements. On the one hand this can be seen as helping contestants/celebrities to build good public images, but on the other hand it is also in line with national policy requirements

and so reflects government influence. Chinese audiences were offered endless participatory opportunities as consumption after the show was broadcast, so that their participation in the manufacture of media artefacts would generate not only profit for media makers but also diversity in commercial culture, to generate a wider cultural phenomenon beyond the show.

On the whole, this chapter suggests that all interactivities offer participation, but that not all participation can be interactive. While the television industry provides endless participatory opportunities to its audiences, this chapter argues that the Chinese television industry in fact produces an illusion of interactivity that is aimed at attracting engaged audiences for commercial profit. The recent growth of interactive opportunities through social media enhances the possibilities for audience engagement and conversation, but also increases the complexities of audience measurement. The television industry only offers Chinese audiences a vision of participation, rather than the real power proclaimed by the industry. The analysis in this chapter has demonstrated that Chinese audiences had no direct interactive power, as their engagement could not be woven into the narrative and content of *TVoC* (2012).

Chapter 5: Hierarchies within the 'Weibosphere'

'There are clear hierarchies of power within the 'Twittersphere' with celebrities, journalists and 'official' accounts from organisations playing a very visible role in (re)circulating information and influencing debate, which must be recognised when we consider the claim for it being a democratic space where all can participate.'

– Ruth Deller (2011)

5.1 Introduction

While the first section of this research has analysed industry, regulation and interactivity (participation) in *TVoC* (2012), this second section will explore Chinese audiences' engagement with *TVoC* (2012) on Sina Weibo. It will examine audience responses in relation to the TV industry's official promotions, to stardom as a phenomenon in social media and to government control. There are two chapters in this section, examining audiences' responses from two different aspects. This chapter will reveal the ways in which audiences responded to the official Weibo site for *TVoC* (2012), and will examine the importance of celebrity Weibo accounts within the 'Weibosphere'. The next chapter in this section will then turn to the negative interpretive processes of Weibo audiences and users, despite the show's reported actual successes. This aims to build towards a more balanced view of the reception of *TVoC* (2012).

In order to investigate Chinese audiences' reception of *TVoC* (2012), it is important to clearly understand the meaning which the title of the show has for them. The Chinese title '中国好声音' (Zhongguo Hao Shengyin) translates directly into English as 'China Good Voice'. This implies to the Chinese audience ideas of 'the perfect voice to represent China' and carries with it connections to certain CCP political ideologies.

In the era of social media, everyone can build up their own social networks online. The online discussions, images, videos, news and conversations posted on social sites can be regarded as user participation opportunities provided by social networks. Those user participations, both from the grassroots and from celebrities will have a certain influence on these platforms as well as in the 'real' world. In mainland China, social media platforms popular abroad, such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and others, are blocked by the Chinese government as they fear that 'unfettered Internet access could undermine Communist Party rule' (Lee, 2011). Hence, Sina Weibo, China's most popular microblogging platform, operated by Sina Corp, has become a major social media platform that has huge influence in Chinese society. As stated by Sina CEO, Charles Chao, 'The right way to enter this market was Weibo's initial function, but now it is changing to become a platform that has a great need for people to communicate, to share among friends, among people who know each other' (Lee, 2011). This chapter suggests that Sina Weibo is the most direct platform for reaching the Chinese public and the quickest way to communicate with Chinese audiences.

In recent times, the simultaneous use of social media and smartphone apps while watching television programmes, and the idea of multi-screen viewing experiences, have given Chinese audiences more participatory platforms. Weibo, as a supplementary tool for television, provides people with opportunities for discussing all kinds of television programmes, interspersed with discussion of home and family life, work, the weather, current affairs and whatever they are watching at the time (Deller, 2011). In China, as elsewhere in the world, the combination of social networks, second screens and TV has given rise to a new relationship between viewers and television. Thus the traditional roles in the communication paradigm have been altered irrevocably.

TV is no longer just a communication medium, but rather it actively involves its users and stimulates interpersonal communication in current Chinese society. New technologies and social media have extended

121

interpersonal communication beyond the boundaries of family, friends, and geographical regions, as Buschow, Schneider and Ueberheide have argued. They conclude that practitioners (Bulkeley, 2010; Ericsson ConsumerLab, 2011; Nielsen, 2011; Richardson, 2010) and researchers (Baillie, Fröhlich, and Schatz, 2007; Chorianopoulos and Lekakos, 2008; Geerts, 2009; Schatz, Baillie, Fröhlich and Egger, 2008; Summa, 2011) propose the merging of television and social media technologies into the notion of 'social TV'. They also explain that practitioners believe that networks and channels in particular can benefit from social TV 'because users could return to linear TV driven by simultaneous communication in social media' (Buschow, Schneider and Ueberheide, 2014, p. 130). The promotional work done through social media is aimed at keeping audiences watching, and growing those audiences so that they can be 'sold' to advertisers. Exploring Weibo also provides a snapshot into the ways that television fans enhance their own viewing experiences using social media tools.

The official Weibo site for *TVoC* offers Chinese audiences a platform to share their evaluations of the show and actors (judges), their expressions of fandom and their critiques of the contestants in the show. Here the question arises, how and to what extent did Chinese audiences respond to the promotional work done by Canxing Production on the official Weibo for *TVoC* (2012)? And what role did celebrity Weibo accounts play in this promotional process in generating more audiences? The activities of celebrity accounts in Weibo present a crucial secondary field of investigation in this question, because they illuminate the promotional strategies that Canxing Production used to promote *TVoC* (2012) on Weibo. While the industry operated the official Weibo for *TVoC* (2012), providing promotional information about the show and creating trending topics online, the communication and interaction between the official Weibo site and other celebrity accounts is also a crucial area of research in understanding audience engagement and participation. Hence, this chapter will also explore Weibo's capabilities and impact on

celebrity discourse, by discussing how celebrity accounts were used and maintained by the industry to build up online communications and influences.

Inevitably, issues of power relations arise in discussions of social media and audiences and these issues must be addressed. As Deller says, the hierarchies of power among celebrities, journalists and 'official' accounts from organisations play a visible role in (re)circulating information and influencing social media debates. In better understanding Chinese audiences, Weibo provides a potentially significant development in our understanding of audiences themselves, and of their relationships with media. Observing and measuring users' engagement with *TVoC* (2012)'s Weibo provides a utility and value in exploring the relationships which develop between industrial organisations, celebrity accounts and grassroots audiences. In Chapter one, this thesis examined China's specific political regulation of reality TV and its audiences and then pointed out that Weibo acts as a so-called 'democratic space' (Zhu and Yao, 2012). This aspect of Weibo's offer attracts some of those people who are accustomed to a communist regime to express themselves using the apparent democracy that is displayed in the Weibo spaces. This is the reason that this chapter chooses to investigate Weibo in more detail.

It is commonly felt in China that Weibo has the power to liberate Chinese audiences, allowing everyone to communicate freely. However, just as Deller (2011) argues in relation to the Twittersphere, not all Weibo users share the same levels of influence and power within the space. Consequently, the interest of this research is to uncover how Chinese audiences may participate and respond in different ways to those which the industry's promotions invite and encourage, while simultaneously considering the emerging hierarchies of power relations among different groups of users. This chapter will suggest that celebrity accounts play a significant role in leading public opinion and influencing the discussions which take place within the Weibosphere. Nevertheless, grassroots users have been empowered by Weibo so that they can influence celebrity and media companies in return.

In 2015, the official Weibo site for *TVoC* had 1,858,881 followers and 12,026 official posts. Through examining these Weibo posts, this chapter applies an online ethnography (Hills, 2002) approach to studying the hierarchies between users, and to exploring Chinese audiences' engagement with *TVoC* (2012). The first season of *TVoC* was broadcast from 13 July 2012 to 30 September 2012, but its official Sina Weibo site posted its first Weibo messages on 2 June 2012, meaning that the official promotion started one month before the show was aired. Posts made during this time period (from 2 June to 30 September 2012) will be chosen as the research sample of Weibo discourses for this study.

Before analysing audiences' relationships to one another and to the show's producers and favoured celebrity, this chapter will look at the ways in which Canxing Production maintained the official Sina Weibo site for *TVoC* (2012) between June and September 2012, and then will further explore how the industry encouraged people to talk about the show on Weibo. It will explore what types of messages were posted, and what themes or topics motivated audiences to share and discuss *TVoC* (2012) with others, especially while they were watching the show. To aid this analysis, this chapter particularly considers how users interacted with others, especially celebrities, in relation to the show.

This chapter will then discuss audience responses to *TVoC* (2012) on Weibo during three periods of time: pre-broadcast (2 June–12 July 2012); early broadcast (13 July–17August 2012) and later broadcast (17 August–30 September 2012). It will examine how Canxing Production promoted the show during these time periods and when and how celebrity accounts (e.g. the four judges' Weibo accounts) were introduced in order to focus audience responses and participation. Only by looking at how fans responded (both positively and negatively) to this activity by the production company can we ascertain how successful the industry and the show were. Furthermore, the extent to which the success of the show was influenced by industry and user activity, and/or by the

Weibo accounts of celebrities, and other 'opinion leaders', can be investigated and evaluated.

5.2 The use of Weibo by Canxing Production

In mainland China, Sina Weibo is the most discussed and controversial social media site. According to the Sina Corporation annual report of 2011 it had more than 50 million active users per day, and 10 million newly registered users per month, A user profile on Sina Weibo displays the user's name, a brief description of the user, their number of followers and the numbers of accounts they follow, and the number of Weibo posts they have made. Scholars, Asur, Yu and Huberman (2011), has identified two types of user accounts on Sina Weibo, regular user accounts and verified user accounts; by verified user account, he means one that typically represents a well-known public figure or organisation in China.

Sina reported in its 2011 annual report that it had more than 60,000 verified accounts, consisting of celebrities, sports stars, well-known organisations (both governmental and commercial) and other VIPs (Sina Corporation annual report, 2011). Among these verified accounts there were a total of 1,772 TV programmes registered on the official Weibo account in China in 2012. This is an example of the way in which TV programmes convergence with social media, in the interaction between them and social media sites such as Sina Weibo, through mutual promotions aimed at the development of each other's interests.

The interactive and participatory opportunities offered by Weibo seem to have been widely embraced by China's media industry, alongside other online media options such as official websites, blogs, and online video channels (Youku, Tudou, Iqiyi and etc.). The media industry has managed Weibo as a promotional strategy, in order to make connections with Chinese audiences, where 'the active attitude towards participating is seen as a basic and enduring

characteristic of audiences, not as something new and unique to the current media situation' (Sundet and Ytreberg, 2009, p. 385). Weibo is a platform for various groups to come together, including celebrities, journalists, producers, writers, media organisations and the users of that media. As Murray (2004, p. 8) says, the industry shows an increasing willingness to 'disseminate highly guarded production information and intellectual property in the interests of sophisticated viral marketing and audience development schemes'.

Canxing Production managed the official Weibo site for *TVoC* to promote, lobby and win over a large audience, by providing audiences with information relevant to the show and participatory and interactive opportunities (as discussed and explored in the previous chapter) as the first step in the promotion process. More ambitiously, Canxing Production routinely displayed an official hashtag at the beginning of a post to encourage discussions, and to use the function of @someone to interact with other public figure's Weibo accounts (including celebrities, producers, journalists, and media organisations) to build an online community. These activities were together intended to lead public opinion.

Like Twitter, the homepage of Weibo shows a list of the top nine trending topics which is constantly updated, and allows a subset of participants to use hashtags (#) to mark posts topically, so that others can follow conversations centring on a particular topic (Boyd, Golder and Lotan, 2010). Users can create topics with a keyword in the content through the use of a hashtag in front and behind this keyword, for example, #The Voice of China#. Through this process, Weibo users can get a sense of the 'hottest' recent topics which other users have been discussing most frequently. Monitoring hashtags and keywords is also a way in which the industry can measure audience engagement and participation. For instance, the official Weibo for *TVoC (2012)* created many different hashtags in relation to the show during June 2012: #Gift from TVOC#(#好声音送好礼#), #TOVC contestants#(#好声音学员鉴赏#), #TVOC tabloid# (#好声音快报#), #TOVC Q&A# (#好声音有奖问答#), etc.

126

This was during the pre-promotion period, so these hashtags created by Canxing Production reflect certain themes and topics that the industry wanted audiences to know about the show and to discuss. This function meant that the Weibo could quickly gain public attention prior to the broadcasting of the first show. Using hashtags, messages and links can be circulated to millions of users within a few minutes. Similarly, current affairs and news stories are frequently and instantly being accessed by users. Another service of Sina Weibo is '@someone'. As with Twitter, directed conversations can involve the use of the '@user' syntax to locate others and address messages to them (Boyd, Golder and Lotan, 2010). This allows the information sender to ensure that the person who they target using @user can see their message.

The official Weibo site for *TVoC (2012)* between June and September 2012, with its 1,861,667 followers, was one of the most popular Weibo accounts for a Chinese TV programme on the Weibo platform. As at 8 October 2012, the online video for *TVoC* (2012) had reached 13 million views, while during the broadcasting period, online discussions on Weibo had reached over 800,000 in number, with related trending topics raising this figure to 1.1 billion. Quantitative data shows that the two platforms for *TVoC* (2012), the TV programme itself and the Weibo account, complemented each other and helped the show to attract large audienceship and generate wider social influences. With over 1.1 billion relevant trending topics, the first season of *TVoC* was very successful and active in soliciting engagement with fans online.

After examining the posts collected from the official Weibo site for *TVoC* for the period 2 June to 30 September 2012, it is apparent that Canxing Production maintained the official Weibo site for *TVoC* (2012) as a means of promoting the programme to other Weibo users, and encouraging them to watch and to interact with it. Before, during and after the show, many messages and a great deal of information were posted to exhort audiences to watch the programme on Zhejiang TV and on other online platforms. The promotional messages were all generally positive, with repeatedly emphasis on the purposes

and principles of *TVoC*, and explaining what 'The Good Voice of China' is and what the show was looking for.

5.3 Pre-broadcast period (2 June–12 July 2012)

Canxing Production had been promoting *TVoC* (2012) since the 2 June, one month before the show aired on 13July 2012. They posted more than 300 Weibo messages during this time, in order to spread information about what *TVoC* (2012) was, the nature of its imported format, slogans, principles, and narrative. In doing so, the initial effort by Canxing Production was to provoke conversation about the show within the Weibosphere. However, at this stage, the promotional work done by Canxing Production was limited to some Weibo users and some pre-existing Weibo fans of the four coaches/judges.

Compared to the other two time periods, the fewest number of Canxing Production-originated Weibo messages were posted during this pre-broadcast stage, and related comments and responses by audiences were the fewest as well. Interactive conversations between Canxing Production and audiences took the form of a Q&A process. Initially users were curious about the programme, perhaps knowing only that it was the Chinese version of *The Voice*. The official Weibo of *TVoC (2012)* responded to users with a mixture of commentary and responses to people's questions posted at the official site:

WuZhengyi: Can I participate in the show?

TVOC: @WuZhengyi: Hello! The principle of our program is about 'only listen to good voice, we don't look at the appearance'! As long as you are willing to show us your beautiful voice, you can join us. Please pay attention to our website for more details. (19 June 2012, 16:16 p.m.)

While answering questions from audiences, Canxing once again emphasised and promoted the purpose and value of *TVoC*. Furthermore, Canxing Production created a hashtag #The Voice Q&A# (#好声音 有奖问答#) for a series of Weibo posts that invited users to participate in the Q&A process. This

activity required participants to answer questions and repost on their own Weibo, using the function of @, to notify at least three of their friends (Weibo followers):

> 'Tomorrow is the time to win an iPad! Today's question is a little bit hard. Everyone please look carefully. How long is each episode of *The Voice of China*?' (28 June 2012, 18:36 p.m.)

Almost every #The Voice Q&A# Weibo post would generate more than 500 reposts and comments. This Q&A process created interactions between *TVoC* (2012)'s official Weibo and its followers, who could be the potential loyal audiences and fans of the show, and so further helped to get information about the show disseminated and promoted.

In addition, during the pre-broadcast period some posts were not directly connected to the show itself. The content of such posts was irrelevant to the music, discussions of singing talent or the four coaches and celebrities. Audience's responses could also be unconnected to official posts. During this time some users appeared to be more willing to engage with Weibo posts that were linked to the four coaches. These users tended to be pre-existing fans who had already been following the coaches' Weibo sites. Canxing Production posted new Weibo using @'celebrity name', so the celebrity concerned would see this post immediately and would repost the message. Once they had reposted it, the followers of this celebrity account would receive the Weibo message as well. For instance:

> TVOC: 'If you have a beautiful voice, if you want China to listen to your voice, if you need a tutor, then come to *The Voice of China* to make your dream come true. Join the group of coach Na Ying. @NaYing @NaYing fanclub' (20 June 2012, 19:15 p.m.)
>
> NaYing fanclub: repost (June 20, 19:16 p.m.)
>
> Bluechouchou: @NaYing fanclub: repost (June 20, 19:36 p.m.)
>
> yixiaoerhuo iNY: repost (June 20, 22:09 p.m.)

Through this 'repost' process, the original promotional information about *TVoC* was spread quickly. From the perspective of audiences, this promotional process can be seen as very limited and had little influence within

the Weibosphere. Limited information and limited receivers made the promotional work done by Canxing Production in the pre-broadcast period seems unsuccessful. However the accuracy of this assessment of its success depends upon an accurate reading of the purpose of Canxing Production in carrying out this activity; it could be seen as successful, if Canxing Production's only aim was to create chains of communication that would continue to be used later on during the broadcasting of the show.

5.4 Early broadcast period (13 July– 17 August 2012)

Within a few hours of its first live broadcast on Zhejiang TV on 13 July 2012, *TVoC* (2012) immediately captured the Chinese audiences' attention and achieved a number one position in the national TV ratings. At the same time, the volume of discussions on Sina Weibo was increasing. Using a trending topic #*The Voice of China* launched# (#中国好声音开播#) and the 'voice' of a first person view, Canxing Production managed the official Weibo site for *TVoC* (2012) as an interactive platform for Chinese audiences:

> TVOC: #The Voice of China launched#: Countdown to 60 minutes! Can't wait to share with you the true voice and the true music. Let's create a different music festival, love you ... @Zhejiang TV China Blue, for more information, please visit http://voice.5ige.cn/ (13 July 2012, 20:16 p.m.)

> TVOC: # The Voice of China launched#: From Heilongjiang, only 24 years old, do not be deceived by his beard. Couch Na Ying affectionately called him 'Momo', so close they are… then will he be one of her team? Please do lock down 'The Voice of China'! Participate in interactive discussions at the official website. @ Zhejiang TV China Blue @ 5ige Original Music. (13 July 2012, 22:05 p.m.)

The majority of audiences showed a positive attitude to the show in responding to the official posts and their discussions are mainly concentrated on the fairness of the blind auditions, the humour and sincerity of the four judges, and the touching stories of the contestants. Through these texts Chinese audiences showed their affirmation and support of the show itself. In particular, it was the

blind auditions and the spinning chairs which made *TVoC* (2012) different and refreshing for Chinese audiences.

The four coaches/judges, Liu Huan(刘欢), Yu Chengqing(庾澄庆), Na Ying(那英) and Yang Kun(杨坤), who were all famous recording artists in China, actually went out and recruited good singers, listened to the contestants in spinning chairs facing away from the stage so as to avoid seeing them, and thus judging them only by their voices. In addition the criteria used to choose the mentors/judges were the same as in the versions of the show aired in other countries. According to South China Morning Post (2012), the four judges needed to be celebrity artists, often including one influential figure from the music industry, one grassroots singer, one designed to attract young audiences and one female. Canxing Production followed the imported format precisely; however, audiences discussed this format and the narrative of the show in regarding to fairness and vocal ability:

> Sean-Chenxiaoyu: I missed the live show yesterday, now watching the rebroadcast. The show really looks good, even the tears of judges   and contestants are so real and touching! (14 July 2012, 17:46 p.m.)

> Beau-beit: I completely love the spinning chairs!! (14th July 2012, 12:10 p.m.)

> Sheyingshi-Zixian: it really has sincerity…let more grassroots dreams come true… how exciting. (14th July 2012, 20:17 p.m.)

From the above discourses, it is clear that audiences articulated their reasons for their love of the show in relation to their personal feelings and life experiences. To some extent, this reveals fans' emotional bonds between themselves, and others in a modern, mediated world (Gray and Harrington, 2007).

Like most reality talent shows, the contestants remained the central focus of audiences' attention and discussion. On Sina Weibo, the vast majority of fans seemed to have their own personal 'idol'. Either because of contestants' real talent, or because of their experiences and stories, fans could always find a resonance with their 'idol' and show them their support.

jessicaOhu: Like this innocent little girl (Xu Haixin), and her explosive

power, [good] Good night friends. (14 July 2012, 00:35 a.m.)

nayang de Qinchun: her voice is special and such a cool personality. Support our Dongbei Girl (Wu Mochou). (28 July 2012, 11:49 a.m.)

The resonance between fans and contestants enabled conversations among *TVoC*'s Weibo which occurred asynchronously and outside geographic constraints, but they were still typically bounded by a reasonably well-defined group of participants in some sort of shared social context (Boyd, Golder and Lotan, 2010). Fans were actively interacting with others who shared similar interests and backgrounds. They interacted and engaged with each other on Weibo, answering questions for one another, and discussing the same topics. Through these practices, their online conversations bound them to watching the show in real time in order to keep up with the rest of the community on Weibo. This is referred to as 'just-in-time fandom', by Matt Hills (2002, p. 10). Hills describes 'just-in-time fandom' a result of a techno-evolution towards fuller 'interactivity', in which fans go online to discuss new episodes immediately after the episodes' transmission times – and even during advertising breaks. New media technology enables Chinese audience to share their speculations, commentaries, thoughts and questions, as in many other countries. Debates should now not only focus on the quality of fan engagement, but also on the timing of fan responses (Hills, 2002).

Interestingly, it seems that Chinese audiences were highly interested in the four coaches (Liu Huan, Yu Chengqing, Na Ying and Yang Kun) and their performances in the show. For instance, @Juejiang de Luobo posted:

This summer, I am obsessed with *The Voice of China*… it attracted my attention even more than the Olympic Games. I love the affinity of Liu Huan, the openness of Na Ying, the humour of Yu Chengqing, and the sensibility of Yang Kun. I love you all… and all the good voices and talent made me a loyal audience member!' (28 August, 22:20 p.m.)

With specific analysis and expressions about the performative personae of coaches, this fan also engaged with the original Weibo posted by *TVoC (2012)*, as though speaking to another user online. For example, @Smile-dodo said:

Suddenly feel I was moved by *TVoC*. Lots of famous stars may not be

132

able to render that kind of mood in a song... Suddenly feel @Yang Kun is so sensitive and soft, liked it.' (20 July 2012, 23:00 p.m.)

Through '@Yang Kun', fans are willingly making an interactive communication directly with the celebrity, although the celebrity may not respond to this Weibo message.

The performative personae of the four coaches appears real, direct and authentic to audiences, and Sina Weibo offers audiences/fans a platform where they feel they might be able to have interpersonal communication with them. The changing relationship between celebrities and their followers within the Weibosphere reflects the 'intercommunicative dimension of online social networks' (Marshall, 2010, p. 43). However, this changing relationship does not represent a shift into a new realm of star interactions, but rather an evolution of existing frameworks that reflect new convergence and technologies, as Thomas (2013) suggests.

This chapter has examined, and suggested a 'failure' of, Canxing Production's attempts to promote the show though Weibo during the pre-broadcast period. However, in the early broadcast period, the celebrities' Weibo did make a significant contribution to the success of *TVoC* (2012)'s promotion. With the programme launched, more and more topics were created for audiences to discuss on Weibo. Many celebrities, as opinion leaders, participated in the discussions of those topics and these encouraged more interactive communication with audiences.

For instance, Yao Chen, a Chinese rising star, with more than 77 million Weibo followers, commented on her Weibo site: '*The Voice of China* refined the most valuable things in life… positive, optimistic, sincere, and brave' (16 July 2012, 01:53 a.m.) and 'I have a serious question, when will the judges change their clothes?' (28 July 2012, 00:16 a.m.). One simple question shows her concern with *TVoC* (2012) and in return this post generated more 12 thousand audience responses. In another example, the Chinese–American singer, Li Wen also reposted a Weibo message about *TVoC* (2012) to show her

support for the show. Other celebrities followed the official Weibo site for *TVoC* (2012) and interacted with it, including Feng Xiaogang (film director), Zhang Liangying (singer), Li Xiang (famous presenter), Wang Luodan (actor), Yang Kun (actor) and Wu Peng (swimming athlete).

The popularity of *TVoC* (2012) was reinforced by celebrities' engagement within the Weibosphere, and in particular by their pre-existing fans. Together they led to new explorations of information-sharing and discussions. Furthermore, Weibo users could generate the desire to search for and share information about *TVoC* (2012) when they saw relevant Weibo posted by their celebrity 'idol' or by other public figures they followed.

The show became more popular as fans of the celebrities became aware of the presence of these celebrities on Weibo, and their interaction with *TVoC* (2012). Celebrities' engagement with the show not only accelerated the speed of information transmission and expanded the scope of influences, it also added great value to the information itself. Hence, during the initial broadcast time of *TVoC* (2012), the show quickly generated rising public awareness through the influences of celebrity promotion, and further user comments and reposts of celebrity Weibo messages followed.

In addition, *TVoC* (2012), as a music talent show, created new stars during the early broadcast period. Contestants from the show registered their own Weibo sites during the broadcasts, and gathered growing numbers of followers and fans. When they interacted with *TVoC* (2012)'s Weibo account, and reposted and commented on the official site, those rising stars also generated more power in leading public opinion. And in the early broadcast period, almost all fans were relatively neutral or positive about *TVoC* (2012) and its content. When viewed in this way, it is obvious to see that grassroots audiences did not share the same power and influence as celebrities and public figures in the Weibosphere. The managed interaction between Canxing Production's *TVoC* Weibo and the celebrities' Weibo formed a powerful force within the Weibosphere that led to the generation of public opinion and

discussions. And indeed Canxing Production has successfully attracted more audiences and Weibo followers through maintaining the official Weibo site for *TVoC*. However, this relationship within the Weibosphere rarely lasts forever and in this case it soon changed during the later broadcast period. The next section of this chapter will explain how audiences' attitudes and discussions changed during the later broadcast period.

5.5 Later broadcast period (17 August–30 September 2012)

In Yu and Asur's work (2011), the key topics that trend on Sina Weibo are examined, and then contrasted with the authors' observations of Twitter. They state that, compared to a global social network such as Twitter, where trends seem to largely relate to current global events and news stories, China's Weibo trends are created almost entirely from reposts of media content such as jokes, images and videos. Their argument is not entirely correct with regard to Weibo and its users, however. In fact current news frequently leads to trending online discussions on Weibo, especially when considering *TVoC* as an example.

This section will explore how fans articulated their responses to negative news about *TVoC* (2012) reported during the later broadcast period. Jenkins and Deuze have identified that the 'democratisation' of media use brings:

> 'a broadening of opportunities for individuals and grassroots communities to tell stories and access stories others are telling, to present arguments and listen to arguments made elsewhere, to share information and learn more about the world from a multitude of other perspectives' (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008, p. 6).

Thus this section will analyse audiences' responses to find out whether Weibo has functioned as a 'democratic space' which has empowered Chinese audiences and consequently changed the power relations between audiences, industry and celebrities in the Weibosphere.

Audiences often interpreted and understood the show and its wider contexts through their own experiences, and likened them to their self-identities.

After almost every episode, new topics about *TVoC* (2012) (many of them initiated by Canxing) would emerge on the Weibosphere, catching users' attention and generating discussions. However, especially during the later broadcast period (after the blind auditions), there were more negative news reports generated about *TVoC*, both online and offline. Some of the negative news was claimed to be industrial marketing hype, and some was sought out by audiences and reported to the Weibo site. No matter how real the news was or not, a larger volume of Weibo discussions was in fact generated about *TVoC* (2012) at this stage than in the early broadcast period.

It not hard to find intense online discussions of *TVoC* (2012) on the Weibosphere which also include social issues, especially when those discussions included the participation of celebrities and public figures. Stories from Weibo discussions then started to be regularly featured in mainstream news outlets (Deller, 2011). For instance, news service websites such as Xinhuanet and Chinanews wrote that they could 'reveal the secret of coaches' clothing', reflecting back on the previously quoted celebrity Yao Chen's Weibo regarding the judges' never-changing outfits. This indicates that the celebrity and public figures' Weibo had become the sources for mainstream news outlets, providing them with entertainment news stories. Likewise, mainstream news outlets also used responses from Canxing Production and audiences to the *TVoC* Weibo as supplemental evidence and discourse to support their reports.

In addition, discussions on Weibosphere were seen to have impacts on the television programme and its content. Because Chinese audiences widely discussed negative news, rumours and controversies about the show on the Weibosphere, Canxing Production had to react to this. It issued statements to clarify relevant facts, and provided short clips of interviews with involved celebrities and contestants. Canxing Production even responded to these within the show, thereby creating a good public image. While media industries were 'manufacturing consent' by enabling participation, and seeking to contain and control the emerging power of new knowledge cultures, the power of audiences,

derived from their pooled knowledge from diverse backgrounds, should not be neglected. It is the media outlets which have the power to define and control the meanings of the show, but the audiences have now played a part in influencing this process.

After the last blind audition, audiences started to question the sincerity and fairness of *TVoC (2012)* on Weibo. On 24 August 2012, a list of contestants to go to the final rounds of *TVoC* was posted (or leaked) on the Internet. Although fans felt disappointed about the spoiler, the volume of online discussions at Weibo increased as more people became interested in the issues of authenticity and fairness. This incident then triggered a large-scale discussion and argument online. In addition, some fans began to investigate the 'real' identities and occupations of contestants and coaches, and then to expose them on Weibo. For instance, user *Biguanyeji* (稗官野记) revealed the Taiwanese coach Yu Chengqing's birth and family history: his ancestral home was in Yunnan province; his grandfather is a warlord and he has a politician father. Some 3,738 Weibo users reposted and commented upon this revelation.

These revelations then evolved into discussions of complex political issues between Taiwan and mainland China. Sensitive political topics and social issues, such as the relationship between Taiwan and mainland China, always get Chinese online users more engaged in online discussion. This is not to suggest that a certain type of online discussion would invariably lead to a celebrity response on Weibo. However, in this case, Yu Chengqing had to personally respond, and so commented on *Biguanyeji'*s Weibo that:

> This means I travelled from Taipei to Kunming to go to high school every day? I was born in Taiwan! Before the age of 25 I never left Taiwan! (20 July 2012, 01:16 a.m.)

This example shows a direct interaction between Yu and *Biguanyeji* on Weibo. Yu Chengqing, as the more powerful figure on Weibo, was challenged and influenced by users' online discussions. This shows the power of the users, in that they were able to learn how to master different media technologies to

137

'bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact (and co-create) with other users' (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008, p. 8).

In the promotional process for *TVoC* (2012) on Weibo, Canxing Production tried to widely spread the show's relevant information and content across the Internet. In this way, it expanded its revenue opportunities, broadened media markets, and reinforced consumer loyalties and commitments. The producer provided advertisers with opportunities for new ways to incorporate publicity within shows. For example, the colour red element in *TVoC* (2012) reminded Chinese audiences of the main local sponsor Jiaduobao (a herbal tea), as in the Netherlands this colour element subtly refers to Vodafone.

Through making use of product placement, or explicitly placing logos on the screen, the show and sponsor indeed drew the attention of Chinese audiences and consumers. In response, audiences expressed a great deal of resentment related to the 'over-commercialisation' debate. Generally, Chinese audiences had very strong anti-commercial feelings and responses towards the show. Internet users mocked the host of the show, Hua Shao, as a 'salesman of tea (Jiaduobao)' and 'the tongue of China' for his fast-talking presenting of a long advertisement for Jiaduobao in 40 seconds. The official Weibo site for *TVoC* (2012) posted a message to describe Hua Shao,

> TVOC: #The Voice of China# Hua Shao is one of the best presenters from Zhejiang TV. He also dabbled in many other fields such as creative literary, film, drama, musical, director, etc. A great number of TV viewers see him as a mighty host. Participate in the official interactive discussions. @ Zhejiang TV China Blue @ 5ige Original Music.@Xinlannet @Jieliya (31 August 2012, 20:54 p.m.)

In response 91 Weibo users reposted this message and responded with 156 comments. Most of these comments were hostile to this official promotional description of Hua Shao:

> weifeng-zhiliang : extremely don't like him!!! Please repost (31 August 2012, 20:55 p.m.)

> gudansongruanmianbaodian: why doesn't he become a behind-the-scenes

worker, as he has so many talents? (31 August 2012, 20:56 p.m.)

longxiaqianchen: he is the biggest failure of the show…. (31 August 2012, 21:07 p.m.)

red—zheng: too many advertisement, a bit overdone (31 August   2012, 21:32 p.m.)

This three main sections of this chapter have discussed Chinese audience responses to *TVoC (2012)* at Weibo during three periods of time: pre-broadcast, early broadcast and later broadcast. The first explored how Canxing Production set up its Weibo account one month before *TVoC* (2012) aired to promote the show and enhance the visibility of the programme online. Through this strategy, Canxing Production created chains of communication that would continue to be used later when the show was being broadcast. However, the limited information spread, numbers of followers and influence within the Weibosphere all demonstrated that the promotional work done by Canxing Production in the pre-broadcast period appeared to be 'unsuccessful'. Counter to this view, this chapter then introduced the importance of celebrities' Weibo account.

This chapter has revealed the shifting relationships between media products within the Weibosphere. The hierarchies among the Weibosphere are based on the reality of users' offline lives. In this it differs from the Baidu Tieba community, in which the hierarchies of the fan community are based on fan engagement and audience consumption, and constant renegotiations of the power between industry, celebrity and audience. In the next section of this thesis, Chapter 7 will explore *TVoC* (2012)'s Baidu Tieba fan community in detail.

Chapter 6: Critical audiences of *The Voice of China* (2012): beyond anti-fandom

'Dislike is as potentially powerful an emotion and reaction as is like.'

- Jonathan Gray (2003)

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter explored how Chinese audiences actively responded to the industry promotion of *TVoC* (2012) through the social media platform Sina Weibo. Weibo allows its users (audiences/fans) a chance to interact with celebrities with the illusion of intimacy, and to effectively organise and mobilise active groups. It also explored the relationship between Canxing Production, celebrities and audiences within the Weibosphere with regard to the managed promotional work done by Canxing. Through the analyses of three time periods, it was revealed that Chinese audiences' response during the later broadcast time were critical and negative towards *TVoC* (2012), as well as describing and discussing social controversies and issues arising from the show. The audiences' engagements were not only linked to the show and the contestants and celebrities involved, but also to the wider socio-political situation with respect to government regulation and intervention, China's political system, and industry promotion. The aim of this chapter is to build towards a more balanced view of the reception of *TVoC* (2012), looking at the negative interpretive processes of Weibo audience/users, which arose despite the show's reported actual successes.

Thus, this chapter will explore how and in what ways audiences criticised *TVoC* on Sina Weibo, focusing on the emergence of multiple critical voices within the fandom and how these appeared, spread and helped to generate new kinds of audience engagement with the show. To be more specific,

my interest here is to find out how audiences resist, and what they are being critical about, while further investigating what kinds of communities Chinese audiences constructed when they were critical on Weibo. From the realm of communication studies, there are two contradictory views about users being actively and critically engaging on Weibo (mainly referring to Sina Weibo) in China. On the one hand, some scholars have emphasised the censored and surveilled nature of the online environment of China. Thus, many studies have been conservative about user participations and expressions, and have turned their focus to how the government monitors people's uses of the Internet in general as well its watch of specific terms and websites (Jiang, 2014).

On the other hand, some scholars (Leibold, 2011; Esarey and Xiao, 2008; Yang, 2009) give focus on the use of Weibo and its effects on citizens' political attitudes and behaviours. They claim that Sina Weibo, as well as the Internet, could potentially enable and facilitate a civic culture in the authoritarian state of China (Chan, Wu, Hao, Xi and Jin, 2012) as users freely express opinions about government and politics on Weibo. Some of them even consider Weibo as a contributor to China's democratic progress that is bringing 'a broadening of opportunities for individuals and grassroots communities to tell stories and access stories others are telling, to present arguments and listen to arguments made elsewhere, to share information and learn more about the world from a multitude of other perspectives', mirroring the processes Jenkins and Deuze (2008) have observed in a democratic Western cultural background.

However, this chapter suggests a different view from which to explore and examine critical audiences, in not only seeing such Weibo users as political activism. The followers of *TVoC* (2012)'s Weibo site are potentially fans or anti-fans of the show and celebrities (including the four judges and popular contestants). This chapter is going to explore and understand the critical audiences' responses to and engagements with *TVoC* (2012), addressing the notion of 'anti-fandom' (Gray, 2003). As Gray (2003) points out, fans and anti-fans share similarities in that they are audiences who like or dislike a

141

personality, content or artefact, keep up-to-date with news and social media and make time to express their positive and negative views. However, anti-fans, are those who strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetically poor.

It is not necessary and not the intention of this chapter to divide audiences of *TVoC* (2012) simply as fans and anti-fans, or non-fans. It suggests the while they watch the show, audiences could have both positive (like) and negative (dislike) feelings in concert with the show and its contestants, or beyond the show's content itself. But by being critical and negatively expressing opinions towards *TVoC* (2012) on the Weibosphere, audiences seem to have more influence and agency within the Weibo community, as the power generated by them is neither industry led nor in the hands of Chinese government. Audiences' engagements with *TVoC* (2012) on Weibo indeed have contributed to the success and prosperity of the show; even the bad publicity created was good for the popularity ratings of the show. Aside from this 'no news is bad news' aspect, most audiences' critical and negative/dislike emotions towards the show are not welcomed by industry promoters. It is not like the phenomenon Annette Hill (2012) has examined – the anti-fandom of professional wrestling – where the negative emotional engagement is vocal, energising, fun and passionate, and welcomed by industry.

Following the methodology of the last chapter, in which online ethnography about audiences' responses to and engagements with *TVoC* (2012) is explored, this chapter will mainly focus on the later broadcast time period, 24 August - 30 September 2012, exploring critical comments from Chinese audiences on the official Weibo site for *TVoC* (2012), which had 1,858,881 followers and 12,026 Weibo messages at this time. Divided into four key sections, this chapter has four key aims. First, section one and two will explore the negative comments and audience criticism of *TVoC* (2012) on Weibo, investigating what texts (and which particular episodes) they disliked and how such texts were formed and their sources. Gray (2003) has highlighted the

importance of studying media textualities as we study media audiences. My interest here moves on to look at certain groups and communities of anti-fans on Weibo, rather than focusing on individual's interpretations of texts and their negative emotions. The chains of conversation between anti-fans are examined hereafter in this chapter to reveal critical discourses. Section three then looks at issues of over-commercialisation as claimed by audiences and will explore how audiences resist the 'over-commercialisation' phenomenon on the Internet. It draws on theories of distinction and taste (Bourdieu, 1984), and in particular discusses issues around taste and authenticity when audiences criticise commercialisation. Finally, section four will contribute to work on *TVoC* (2012) as a media phenomenon by focusing on how SAPPRFT and government regulations were critiqued by anti-fans on Weibo. Through responding to a reality show, Chinese audiences are actually expressing their wider political interests and attitudes.

6.2 Fans and anti-fans

This chapter uses the fans and anti-fans theory of Annette Hill and Jonathan Gray's that features in Hill's work. The concept of the anti-fan is another crucial development in fan studies, and is one which Jenkins (1996) and Hills (2003) have covered in some detail. In essence, the anti-fan is seen as a core component in the overall matrix of fan identity, thus expressions of distaste for a certain media text have a broader socio-cultural purpose than simply the venting of a point of view. Rather, as Jenkins and Hills have both observed, anti-fans will often engage in great depth with the very texts which they ostensibly dislike. This engagement can take a variety of forms, and appear across a variety of platforms (blogging, tweeting, word-of-mouth, podcasts and so on). Jonathan Gray (2003) and Cornel Sandvoss (2005) argue that to fully understand what it means to interact with texts we must also examine anti-fans, rather than simply focusing on and categorising fan activities as forms of

resistance. The articulation of anti-fandom has come to occupy a significant portion of the subcultural mediasphere, through which numerous subcultural phenomena are connected by online media, thus aggregating into a broader, decentralised community.

Recent fan studies and cultural studies research into the idea of anti-fandom can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s, specifically in regard to the idea of 'sub-cultural capital' put forward in Sarah Thornton's works on club culture in *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (1996). In this text, Thornton moves away from Bourdieu's ideas of cultural capital, positing her own idea of subcultural capital which serves as a mode of resistance to mainstream culture. The important critical progression, here, is that Thornton applies the general principles at play in Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to those who exist outside the dominant culture: the marginalised or niche. According to Thornton, subcultural capital is associated with a kind of identity construct configured in opposition to the dominant social codes which surround music and club life. As an example, subcultural capital is directly connected with a rejection of the (mainstream) music industry's formations of authenticity and status. Indeed, a direct rejection of dominant culture is a key component in subcultural capital, in that individuals accrue status precisely by rejecting the conventions of status offered up by the recording industry. UK club-goers, Thornton argues, forge identities oriented around music which are crafted in negation of the recording industry's dominant tropes. Through the application of Boudieu's notion of taste and cultural capital, and Thornton's subcultural capital, to anti-fandom we can identify a connection between all the academics mentioned above. A principle connecting component is the theme of symbolic resistance, particular inasmuch as cultural practices may be employed in ways which articulate positions of resistance to the dominant culture.

TVoC (2012) achieved extraordinary commercial success and popularity in China, however its audiences were clearly struggling to negotiate between the position of fans and anti-fans during the show's broadcast. On the Weibo

page of *TVoC* (2012), there was a wealth of fan material that discussed the show with clearly positive voices, but others were more negative and critical in their judgements. As observed in the last chapter, those negative voices emerged on Weibo mostly during the later broadcasting time period, 24 August to 30 September 2012. *TVoC* (2012) in total had 14 episodes, categorised into three sections: the blind auditions (13 July–17 August 2012), the battle rounds (24 August–14 September) and the knockout rounds (21 September–30 September). The contestants who successfully passed the blind auditions went through to the battle rounds, where singers from each of the four teams were put into pairs and performed against each other in a mock boxing ring. The other three coaches were also given opportunities to express opinions and suggestions, helping the mentor to identify the competition and cut their team of 12 contestants to just four.

Within this competition-based narrative, the setting of a mock boxing ring during the battle rounds is particularly interesting. For the producer, such a setting was used to add on-stage effects and to increase the competitive atmosphere. For the audience, there was undoubtedly a dilemma around alternative choices, as they needed to give support to the contestant they liked and be actively against the others simultaneously. During this time period, audiences actively played the role of being fans and anti-fans at the same time on Weibo, displaying their intense emotional engagement in opposition to each other, expressing their feelings of like and dislike for the show and the contestants.

Figure 3. Mock boxing ring of the battle rounds of *TVoC* (2012)

In her article Annette Hill (2014) analysed and explored different types of labours involved in live wrestling events, where spectators switched roles between performing as a fan and an anti-fan. For Hill (2014), audiences' expressions of passion towards sports entertainment is the key point, and can include both negative and positive emotions. Fans and anti-fans put on a show, taking up alternating positions so that they can revel in controlled chaos. In the case of *TVoC* (2012), the mock boxing ring during the battle rounds hence produced and heightened in audiences a balance of tension and excitement, and then live emotional engagements were strongly encouraged on Weibo. This created in Weibo a similar type of space to those found in live wrestling events. For example, there were intense discussions of audiences on Weibo in response to the ninth episode of *TVoC* (2012), the battle rounds from mentor Na Ying's team, on 7 September 2012. The official Weibo page of *TVoC* (2012) posted nearly 60 Weibo at the same time as the show was being broadcast on Zhejiang TV. Eight of them were about the contestant Liang Bo, a 21-year-old man from Na Ying's team, who won the championship in the first season of *TVoC*; and Huang Yong, Liang's opponent, who was the owner of an independent nail art

146

shop. Looking at certain groups of Liang and Huang's fans and anti-fans on Weibo, and exploring the chains of conversation between them, it is not hard to see that audiences switched between the position of fan and anti-fan constantly. Those who acted as anti-fans engaged as much as the fans. This can fit with what Matt Hills has called 'just-in-time-fandom', where fans 'go online to discuss new episodes immediately after the episode's transmission time – or even during ad-breaks – perhaps in order to demonstrate the 'timeliness' and responsiveness of their devotion' (Hills, 2002, p.178).

The official Weibo page of *TVoC* (2012) updated Weibo in a timely fashion to introduce audiences to the competition happening in real time on Zhejiang TV, including which contestants and songs would be airing. Each Weibo generated nearly 1,000 comments, with one even gathering more than 2,000 comments. One particular Weibo called out its audiences to participate in the discussion and to speculate about the winner of the contest between Liang Bo and Huang Yong:

> TVOC: #The Voice of China# Liang Bo vs Huang Yong, on the sixth group of contestants from Na Ying's team, who will be better tonight? Zhegjiang satellite TV is now broadcasting! Participate in the official interactive discussion. @Zhejiang TV China Blue @5ige Original Music. @Xinlan net @Jieliya (7 September 2012, 22:15p.m.)

Most of the audience members who responded to this Weibo and reposted it did so by answering to the question with a 'shout out' of Liang Bo or Huang Yong's name. In the meantime, many fans of Liang Bo switched to being active anti-fans of Huang Yong, and critically judged Huang as:

> Dumaomaobobo: too artificial and exaggerated, he is a Beijing singer not some nail art boss, so fake. (07 September 2012, 22:18 p.m.)

> Keerdodo: @Dumaomaobobo Huang Yong has overdone the performance, he was imitating all the time… (07 September 2017, 22:18 p.m.)

> Qiuxiaju: too many skills overshadowing his voice (07 September 2017, 22:19 p.m.)

> DreamingMZ: @Qiuxiaju: this is rock and roll. You know nothing! (07 September 2012, 22:24 p.m.)

> Yongyi: @DreamingMZ you don't need to be hysterical all the time to rock and roll (07 September 2012, 22:24 p.m.)

Here, fans switched to being anti-fans as a support for their existing fan object. Anti-fans critically judged Huang Yong's performance and talent rather than his personality. They treated him as an anti-object and a text that they could symbolically rework. Many examples can be found on Weibo, such as like the conversation between @qiuxiaju, @DreamingMZ and @Yongyi presented above. In facilitating this process, Weibo's functions @ and #hashtag allowed audiences, fans and anti-fans to be more visible to each other. Through their conversations against each other and expressing negative engagements, they were communicating and sharing with each others, which brought them enjoyment and fun.

Fans and anti-fans, by being critical about certain episodes, contestants or mentors, together tried to make themselves as visible as possible, not only to each other, but also to the online audience as a whole, to the celebrities and to *TVoC* (2012). Moreover, spectators not only switched roles between performing as a fan and an anti-fan. Some fans/anti-fans could move from one fan object to another, while retaining an interest in both objects, rather than discarding one and replacing it with another.

6.3 Anti-fans and negative news reports

In Yu and Asur's work (2011), the authors examine the key topics that trend on Sina Weibo and contrast them with their observations of Twitter. They found out that, compared to a global social network such as Twitter, on China's Weibo, trends are created almost entirely from reposts of media content such as jokes, images and videos. In contrast Twitter trends seem to have more to do with current global events and news stories (Asur, Huberman, Szabo, and Wang, 2011). However, their argument is not entirely correct with regard to Weibo and its users. In fact current news reports frequently lead to online discussions on Weibo, especially if taking *TVoC* (2012) as an example. During the later

broadcast period, negative news reports about *TVoC* (2012) emerged. As the show aired, some contestants grew in popularity, attracting vast numbers of fans, and in consequence they also received higher social attention and interest. Media news outlets treated some contestants like celebrities, reported their personal lives and careers, and there was some invasion of their privacy. Such contestants as Li Daimo, Xu Haixin and Jike Junyi all experienced problematic situations resulting from 'being exposed on the Internet'.

Most of these negative news reports then became the trending topics on Weibo and created chaos in the boisterous Weibo space where various opinions could be amplified. But what is more interesting here are audiences' responses to negative news, especially the anti-fans' critical views and behaviour. Here, those who hated *TVoC* (2012), responded in a particular way which was called *renrou sousuo* (人肉搜索) and translates to 'human flesh searches'. Playing the role of online vigilante justice, some 'netizens' track down and punish people who have attracted their dislike, anger, and wrath. Their goal is to make the targets' lives a misery, shamed by public judgement, according to Daily Mail (2014)

In the case *TVoC* (2012), several contestants became 'human flesh' sought out by furious netizens for exposure on Weibo. Take contestant Li Daimo as example: he rose to fame after he sang Wanting Qu's *You Exist in My Song* (Wo De Ge Sheng Li) in the blind audition and was selected to joint mentor Liu Huan's team. On 27 August 2012, Weibo user Yikeludan (一颗卤蛋) posted a Weibo including his photo with Li Daimo, speaking in the tone of Li's boyfriend:

> Yikeludan: My ex-boyfriend, we were in a good relationship before, Now he is famous, we broke up, Fuck you. @Li Daimo

His Weibo soon generated lots of online discussions. Other netizens also engaged with these 'human flesh searches' using their own knowledge and perceptions. They had guessed Li Daimo was gay because they had researched him online and discovered this information, as exemplified in the following

posts reproduced by a news outlet: 'he followed many Weibo accounts/users who are homosexual', 'the bear T-shirt he wore when he sang *You Exist in My Song* is a very popular one among the homosexual community' (China News, 2012). Anti-fans' practices such as these indicate the potential joy and pleasure they experience when discussing gossip and rumours relating to fan objects. Through this collective work, anti-fans were building groups and communities attached not to the original show, but to a new fan object of hatred.

Jonathan Gray (2003) identified anti-fans though looking at certain aspects of shows that fans dislike, such as:

> audiences having previously watched the show and having found it intolerable; to having a dislike for its genre, director or stars; to having seen previews or ads, or seen or heard unfavourable reviews (Gray, 2003).

He also suggested that anti-fandom is disruptive on many levels, and it remains an amorphously defined, highly pathologised, and is an easily dismissed blind spot in fan studies (Gray, 2003). I argue that *renrou sousuo* (human flesh searches) are a particular and excessive way of practicing anti-fandom in mainland China. Rather than dismissing one of the fan objects or switching between fan and anti-fan roles, there was a particular audience group, who may not even have watched *TVoC (2012),* who extremely negatively expressed their dislike for it on Weibo. Their knowledge of the show came from without audiences' own programme viewing experiences, from negative news reports and online (Weibo) discussions. One Weibo noted:

> Doeike: Such a rubbish programme! Impressive shady stories! Never watched it! But I heard so many shady stories of the show! So I come and see what's so great. Frankly, *The Voice of China* gained good sponsorship…with the funds, even the most terrible programme would get some fame. All TV programmes are profit driven, but I think a good one must be fused with real needs. Can't be vague on the most original minds and dreams! (31 August, 23:42 p.m.)

Although some audiences dislike and refuse to engage with any meaning in the original texts they can still construct images of the original text somehow. For different types of audiences, there are certainly different types of textuality. This is indeed what Gray posits when he identifies that audiences' positive and

negative feelings can be constructed from paratextual fragments such as 'news coverage or word-of-mouth, reading, watching and learning all they can about a show, book, or person in order to better understand and criticize the text' (Williams, 2013).

6.4 Critical Audiences: Anti-over-commercialisation

By showing their dislike, audiences were judging and identifying what a text should be like, what they consider is a waste of media time and space, what morality or aesthetics texts should adopt, and what we would like to see others watch or read. As stated by Gray, there are always expectations behind dislike (Gray, 2003). This section therefore draws on theories of distinction and taste, to explore how audiences criticised *TVoC (2012)* on Weibo as 'overly commercialised' and looks at what they expected to come from their criticisms. Issues of taste and authenticity are an important part of the ways in which audiences criticise on commercialisation.

Generally, Chinese audiences had very strong anti-commercial feelings and responses towards the show, as can be seen from an examination of the official Weibo page of *TVoC* (2012). When audiences complained on Weibo and expressed a great deal of resentment corresponding to the 'over-commercialisation' debate, what did they mean by over-commercialisation? What issues and problems were they addressing? In the case of *TVoC* (2012), the production company provided advertisers with opportunities for new ways to incorporate publicity within shows. For example, the colour red element in *TVoC* (2012) reminds the Chinese audience of the local main sponsor *Jiaduobao* (a herbal tea), as in the Netherlands, this element subtly refers to Vodafone. Through making use of product placement or explicitly placing logos on the screen, the show and sponsor indeed drew the attention of Chinese audiences and consumers to commercial interests. This activity provides a sense

of how television programmes sought to brand themselves as part of an overall cultural repertoire or production strategy.

However, from the perspective of some audience members, frequent spots and advertisements for Jiaduobao drink were hard to bear:

> FuMOMO: Too many adverts!!!!!! Won't watch it again! Such a low, rubbish show (30 September 2012, 23:56 p.m.)

> Banyewugengshuibuzhao: I feel like I am being attacked by adverts! Bury me…(30 September 2012, 23:57 p.m.)

> ShanghaiRose_Zhangjun: Cannot stand it [adverts] anymore, I'd better go online to watch the replay. (1 October 2012, 01:09 a.m.)

Hai Qing, a famous Chinese actress, also described her feelings on her Weibo page: *#The Voice of China#* 'It feels like somebody pinches the judges' neck when the advertisement suddenly came out at every tense moment…' (31 August 20102, 22:41 p.m.). In total 539 Weibo users responded to her with the same negative attitudes to the adverts, and even *TVoC* (2012) reposted and responded to Hai Qing's Weibo saying: 'sorry, but we had no choice' (31 August 2012, 22:57 p.m.). In this way, audiences' critical reception of the show as 'low' and 'commercial' was also concerned with association with the collective power to change this situation that, as Weibo user Liufangdeqie appealed, '@yixiangblog Let's repost this, let the organizers see this… make some adjustments!!!' (1 September 2012, 00:27 a.m.). Clearly, there was strong dislike in the responses of the audiences discussions on Weibo, and disliking is as potentially powerful an emotion and reaction as is liking. Hai Qing then became a symbolic object, as the leading voice of this anti-fan community.

Through criticising advertising and over-commercialisation, and seeing *TVoC* (2012) as a symbol of these disliked aspects of current Chinese culture, anti-fans here gained a thrill above and beyond what they saw as the sensibilities of the mass culture. They adopted the stance of superior and assertive audiences, to distance themselves from others who they constructed as 'inferior and threatening, a mindless and conformist horde associated with mass,

middlebrow and legitimate culture' (Jancovich, 2000, p, 26). The critical receptions from anti-fans below show us how they resisted these 'others':

> Mtanteshenjingxixi: The good advertisements of China!! Exactly how many ads??? (30 September 2012, 23:56 p.m.)

> MonsterTsui: I will chose…the adverts! (30 September 2012, 23:56 p.m.)

> Yanbt: Who will remain on this stage and sing for everyone is…..Jiaduobao!! (30 September 2012, 23:56 p.m.)

> Yueeryuehaisen: I seriously want to protest to Zhengjiang TV that do not supports *The Voice of China* when broadcasting the movie trailers and adverting. (30 September 2012, 23:36 p.m.)

Here they sought to emphasise their negative feelings and emotions towards the show by being ironic about advertising. They defined *TVoC* (2012) as an inauthentic commercial product of mainstream culture that is opposite to their own privileged tastes as 'real' and 'authentic'. 'The good (something) of China' even became an ironic template for other issues afterwards, such as 'The good actor of China', 'The good business of China'. When using this, people were ironically suggesting that they were not *good* things of China, and not authentic. The other two sentences 'I will chose…', 'who will remain on this stage and sing for everyone is …' are used to mock the mentors as they frequently repeated these phrases in the show.

In addition, anti-fans were targeting certain objects to hate while they made distinctions between 'them' and 'the industry'. Audiences claimed that Hua Shao, the host of *TVoC* (2012), became the representative of this over-commercialised programme. The production team of *TVoC* (2012) promoted Hua Shao as a multi-talented presenter:

> TVOC: #The Voice of China# Hua Shao is one of the best presenters from Zhejiang TV. He has also dabbled in many other fields such as creative, literary, film, drama, musical, director, etc. A great number of TV viewers see him as a mighty host. Participate in the official interactive discussions. @Zhejiang TV China Blue @ 5ige Original Music. @Xinlan net @Jieliya (August 31, 20:54 p.m.)

However, audiences criticised and mocked him as a 'salesman of tea' (Jiaduobao) and 'the tongue of China', because of his extraordinary fast-

speaking 40-second presentation of the long advertisement for Jiaduobao in every episode. 91 Weibo users reposted this Weibo message and responded with 156 comments. All of these comments were posted in opposition to the official promotional description of Hua Shao:

> weifeng-zhiliang : extremely don't like him!!! Please repost!!! (31 August 2012, 20:55 p.m.)

> gudansongruanmianbaodian: why doesn't he become a behind-the-scenes worker, as he has so many talents? (31 August 2012, 20:56 p.m.)

> longxiaqianchen: he sucks!! Slurred speech… no good sense of humour. He is the biggest failure of the show…. (31 August 2012, 21:07 p.m.)

> red—zheng: he is ugly and low… a salesman not a presenter (31 August 2012, 21:32 p.m.)

> Yidongxiaofeixie: really do not fancy him. He has no interactive move, no passion, no expressions, and no style, only a vast amount of advertising! (31 August 2012, 17:23 p.m.)

They are not only saw Hua Shao as an inauthentic presenter, but also as the symbol of overly commercial production, representing the low, inferior and inauthentic mainstream Chinese TV industry. Hence, by showing their dislike and expectations, they were actually trying to distinguish themselves from low and bad taste aspects of mainstream culture.

It is interesting that audiences also made comparisons between *TVoC* (2012) and other versions, such as *The Voice (U.S.)* and *The Voice of UK,* some of them claiming they would not continuing watching *TVoC* (2012*)* as it was not the original text but a by-product of globalisation. They suggested that the format was importing Western cultural imperialism, and causing the destruction of cultural identities, and creating victims of the accelerating encroachment of a homogenised, westernised, consumer culture (Tomlinson, 2003). Others showed positive expectations and a willingness to watch this globally popular programme and they felt proud of having their own version of *The Voice*. In other words, some people may have seen *TVoC* (2012) as a platform that could bind communities and nations together, however, others worried more about the reduction in cultural diversity and variety. These struggles for originality are

embedded in the wider issues of globalisation. Those audiences who fear the obvious power of globalised capitalism to distribute and promote its cultural goods to every corner of the world are anti-globalisation, as they fear it may prey on their cultural identity. Through their resistance to the force of capitalist globalisation, they are demonstrating their superior positions as thoughtful people.

6.5 Towards a critique of the wider political environment in China

For a long time, China's regulations on reality shows were seen as very strict and selective, in that SAPPRFT produced many specific regulations applying to the film and TV industry and its contents. Surprisingly, SAPPRFT'S attitude to *TVoC* (2012) was positive, and the show has been credited with helping to rehabilitate the TV entertainment genre. This follows on from authority crack-downs on vacuous, vulgar broadcasts prior to *TVoC* (2012)'s broadcast. SAPPRFT issued a report on 26 July 2012, after just two episodes had been screened, saying that the show's grassroots singers had moved audiences with their extraordinary talents, and praising the judges' comments for their warmth and sincerity (Xinhua Insight, 2012). This gives us a sense that *TVoC* (2012) had won approval from SAPPRFT which was China's broadcasting watchdog At the time. This statement by SAPPRFT also reveals the congruence of political attitudes between SAPPRFT, the producers of *TVoC* (2012) and the show's content.

Similarly the voice of the Chinese government was completely consistency with SAPPRFT. Later, on 24 August 2012, Ge Huijun, a member of the standing committee of Zhejiang's provincial committee, and the vice-governor and head of the publicity department of Zhejiang province, announced official recognition of *TVoC* (2012) on the SAPPRFT webpage:

> The show *The Voice of China* from Zhejiang Satellite TV highlights the characteristics of public good, encourages positive motivation and

positive energy, and shows that 'the beauty, the goodness and the truth' lives on for a new world. *The Voice of China* is a good show that unifies the orientation, the artistry and the visual value (SAPPRFT, 2012).

Those words 'good', 'positive', and 'the beauty, the goodness and the truth' together constructed a dominant view and a positive image of *TVoC* (2012); it further implied what a reality talent show should look like in China. Xu Fan, a researcher with the Communication University of China, even praised the show as transmitting positive values and deep humanistic concerns in modern China society.

However, audiences for *TVoC* (2012) were not as positive as SAPPRFT and other government figures. A wealth of critical discussions on Weibo regarding the show revealed struggles and conflicts between audiences and their wider real-life political interests. While fans largely embraced the popularity and success of the show without taking a political position, anti-fans were clearly troubled and confused by the show in concert with negative emotions which they held about SAPPRFT. They received the show as an inauthentic compromise with the government regulator, SAPPRFT, and the CCP.

SAPPRFT functions as one of the ministries of the State Councils and regulates broadcasting nationally, and this and the CCP are the most consistent objects and symbols that Chinese audiences blame and criticise in their online discussions. 'Guangdian' (广电), which is the oral short description for SAPPRFT, and 'Dang' (党), which is short for the CCP, are the most common words that audiences utilise in expressing their negative emotions regarding China's political situation. These two words are symbolically perceived as meaning 'power' and 'dominate' and became anti-fandom objects. However, the bureaucratic system in China is extremely hierarchical, and is spread through governmental bodies and CCP institutions (Anokwa, 2003). The Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of CCP is actually the de-facto top administrator of China's media industry, including broadcasting. Hence, SAPPRFT's head is only the deputy minister in line below the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the CCP. As such, the

156

Propaganda Department of the CCP's provincial committee is the top regulator of media in each province. Therefore, Zhengjiang's provincial TV broadcasting is under the supervision of the Zhengjiang provincial propaganda office. It can be said that the effectiveness of SAPPRFT's regulatory policies is greatly impacted by the attitudes of provincial governments.

This can be seen clearly in the case of *TVoC* (2012), where audiences blamed SAPPRFT and the CCP without carefully looking into the power relations in the hierarchical political system existing among governmental bodies and CCP institutions. For instance, on 30 September 2012, *TVoC* ended its first season with a live performance show. Liang Bo, a 21-year-old man from Na Ying's team, won the championship based on voting from limited audiences at the live show and 99 media representatives. He won with a performance of '*I love my country*', a rock song written by Chinese rock musician Wang Feng, but many audiences felt disappointed and criticised him on Weibo:

> kuailexiaoyu1108: although Liang Bo was steady, his performance has no sincerity and no emotion. However the judges like him, there is nothing we can do… (22 October 2012, 09:20 a.m.)

> vvvickybaby: anyone would be better than Liang Bo. I like Zhang Wei. (5 October 2012, 09:46 a.m.)

> gouxuedepianjiaming: there is no justice in this country!!! Everyone should have his or her own champion in the heart. There is no need to taunt on Weibo. It's meaningless. (3 October 2012, 11:52 a.m.)

Emotional reactions registered by Weibo users indicated a growing intolerance for fake and vague discourses based on the champion contestant Liang Bo's performance but reflecting the core of the government's propaganda line. Furthermore, they made their negative perceptions ever clearer in the following sentence:

> Leslie-Du: It's a competition for singing talent, not a show of selecting patriots. This is so political conspiracy…. (30 September, 2012, 23:57 p.m.)

> Daisy_Duanxu: no need to continue the match, Liang Bo will be the champion! We all know…. (30 September, 2012, 23:56 p.m.)

> Yangpangxie de kuailewa: the voice of the Party, fuck! Who else could be the champion if it's not you. (30 September, 2012, 23:56 p.m.)

> Keaide Jincan: Is this song going to celebrate the upcoming National Day? (30 September, 2012, 23:56 p.m.)

Liang's version of 'I Love my Country' is not a real 'red song', when compared to the traditional version of 'I Love You China' by contestant Ping An. The term 'red song' here refers to a genre of songs from the days of communist propaganda in the Mao era (Wang, 2012). Red songs originate and are adapted from old folksongs, poetry and anthems from the Sino-Japanese war, have messages and meanings such as 'love Chairman Mao', 'love the Party' and 'hate the Japanese' (Wang, 2012). In recent years, according to Wang (2012), the government has repackaged red songs as popular music and simultaneously adapted popular music into the red song repertoire as ideological education aimed at Chinese young people. Some people see red songs as a symbol of revolution and socialism, standing for revolution and socialism in China, while more critical views see it as 'red culture' used recently to promote social stability and party propaganda. In addition to local singing activities and red song TV singing contests, the genre of the red song even merged into reality talent shows in 2012. From the perspective of the television industry, it is a clever way to be 'politically correct' in China. This also demonstrates that politics and culture, propaganda and commerce, education and entertainment are all mixed together for the smooth operation of ideological control in today's China, as Wang (2012) has examined and argued. Nevertheless, looking from the audience perspective, receptions are much more negative and critical towards such control.

As Liang Bo was crowned for his rendition of this song, lots of audience members then linked it to nationalism and 'revaluing our culture and roots' in a negative way: 'It's the wrong time to show support of red songs now and it can be very risky', 'Liang Bo's victory shows the 'official' standard of aesthetics and value systems in current China.' Weibo user @panghurui then commented:

> 'Mainstream voice. Official values. Of course Liang Bo wins because it's

National Day. Even entertainment shows are telling us: 'Please be politically correct all the time'.

Some people may see *TVoC* as a platform that binds communities and nations together, however some may also worry more about the reductive effect on cultural diversity and variety.

Here, audiences related Liang Bo's performances to their own conditions of existence, which were characterised by wider political attitudes and perceptions of power. While they saw the rock song 'I love my country' as a party propaganda 'red song', they also implied that *TVoC* (2012) was an inauthentic show with political corruption. In this way, audiences were making distinctions within fan cultures between authentic and inauthentic shows, and at the same time were also making a sense of the distinction between 'them' and 'us', between powerless civilians and powerful government regulators. On one level, in maintaining the official Weibo site for *TVoC* (2012), Canxing Production sought to extend its reach by merging, co-opting, converging and synergising their brands and intellectual properties across all of these channels. As Jenkins states, this maintenance has concentrated the power of traditional gatekeepers and agenda setters in some ways. And in other ways, it has disintegrated the tight control over our culture.

Chapter 7: Breaking the 'rules': Regulations and Fan Hierarchy within Fandom for *The Voice of China* on Baidu Tieba

> Within the informational economy of the net, knowledge equals prestige, reputation, power. Knowledge gains currency through its circulation on the net…
>
> – Henry Jenkins (1995)

7.1 Introduction

Although audiences' engagement with *TVoC* (2012) is the main focus of this thesis, various relationships between Chinese audiences, industry promoters and government regulators are also examined throughout sections one and two of this chapter, and a range of examples of audience engagement with the show are explored and analysed. Section three continues considerations of Chinese audiences' engagement within an unofficial online space – Baidu Tieba – through an exploration of a particular fan community of *TVoC* (2012).

Section three will focus on fans, who can be defined as viewers who act outside the common expectations for a member of the audience. Unlike 'followers' on Sina Weibo, who enjoy the show but do not claim a fan-related social identity, Baidu Tieba, as its initial declaration states, offers a *'completely user-driven network service'* to its users. The site has obviously signalled that it is a meeting place for fans. In mainland China, Baidu Tieba, also known as *'netbars'* or *'postbars'*, has generally been seen as a platform where China's Internet 'fan culture' originated (Li, 2014), made up of numerous keyword-based discussion forums and film/TV series fan clubs. In considering Baidu Tieba and fan culture, current Chinese scholars see Baidu Tieba as playing a role in developing fan culture in China (Chen and He, 2008), which is to say that its popularity is closely linked to 'fans' and 'fan culture'. The fan culture residing on Baidu Tieba is marginal and deviates from mainstream culture; fans

160

create new meanings for texts through the ways in which they restructure and collage them to form a unique fan subculture on the platform (Leibold, 2011). With its millions of topic-based forums, Baidu Tieba can function simultaneously as a self-aggregating 'hive mind' and 'cloistered cocoons of cognitive consonance', as Leibold (2011) noted.

However, it has also been noted that Baidu has close relations with the Chinese government and strictly complies with national policies and regulations. Baidu Tieba is the forum which most strictly censors its content for violence, pornographic content and anti-government articles. It was widely known in 2012 by Chinese Internet users that Baidu Teiba imposed very strict political censorship, in particular in blocking and deleting politically sensitive terms, as defined by the government propaganda department. Tieba posts would also be accidentally deleted when clearing robot spam posted on the platform by online marketing. In China, such spam is known as 'the navy' ('shuijun', 水军) 'hanging around' in the Internet. In dealing with this, the head of Baidu Tieba, Shu Xun, revealed that Baidu Tieba on average deleted one million posts every day (Qiwan, 2010).

So far there is no evidence showing that posts on Baidu Tieba for *TVoC* were removed or censored by the central government, but there is a great deal of evidence showing that the content of fans' posts were censored and removed from the tieba by its moderators, known in Chinese as *bazhu* (吧主). In the vocabulary of *bazhu* from different online communities, this regulatory activity has been called *shantie fenghao* (删帖封号), which means 'deleting the posts and closing relevant *Baidu* accounts'. This information is important to know in enabling understanding of the role of the moderators of Baidu Tieba and how they regulate their online communities. The following sections will further explore how fans engage with *TVoC* on Baidu Tieba, and its regulatory rules in relation to such engagement.

My interest here is to observe how the ideas of power and hierarchy have imbedded into the fan community of *TVoC* on Baidu Tieba. Within the

Baidu Tieba space, the Chinese government and industry promoters play the role of authority figures, the symbols of power. Under these circumstances, it is interesting to explore the engagement and negotiation of power within the fan community. It is clear that industry promoters have interfered in fans' *TVoC* spaces on Baidu Tieba, spaces which used to be, in the organisation's words, *'completely user-driven network services'* in mainland China. Struggling to express themselves in the shadow of industry promoters and community regulations, fans of *TVoC* sought ways to break and challenging the 'rules' and hierarchy, such as expressing and discussing their discontent and resistive reception with each others; appealing to be fairly treated within the community and reporting and complaining about others' potentially harmful posts and requiring them to be removed.

Using ideas about power and hierarchy, this chapter is going to investigate questions about the extent to which fans are *'free'* to engage with *TVoC* on Baidu Tieba: how and in what ways are their interactions and discussions monitored, controlled and censored in this space, by whom and why? It will investigate the nature of the censorship involved and will also look for evidence of 'resistive' reception and behaviour that might still challenge official directives and regulatory frameworks. The previous chapter's exploration of audience's reception based upon fragmented comments and expressions on social media will be extended within this chapter to consider how Chinese fans resist the content control over the Baidu Tieba of *TVoC* (2012).

This chapter argues that, with the emergence of 'participatory culture' (Jenkins, 2006), fandom of *TVoC* (2012) within Baidu Tieba offered opportunities for fans to participate in the community-making process of any fan object, enabled 'executive fans' to exercise dominant power over other fans and set out regulations and rules within a fan hierarchy. Instead of the traditional split of fan identity between the 'good' fan producers and the 'bad' fan consumers (Hills, 2002), this chapter focuses more on the fan hierarchy of a community that integrates fan self-regulations and fan promotion. It can be

argued that *tieba bazhu* and other fans of *TVoC* occupy a hierarchy of power, with the *bazhu* positioned as dominant, followed by users who identify themselves as real fans. The *bazhu* hold the dominant power in regulating the other fans, as they are able to set the agenda for fan discussion through the imposition of specific regulations, and may further to control the information flow in their own way. Meanwhile, other fans have been offered an upgrade system that uses credits (*jinyanzhi)* for engagement to exchange for higher privileges and power, such as fan 'discursive power'.

This chapter examines the fan community of *TVoC* at Baidu Tieba, in order to understand fan hierarchy and power relations within the online fan community. In focusing on Chinese audiences' online engagement with *TVoC*, an audience reception study approach would be the best method for gaining critical insights into fan hierarchy and regulations. The goal of this chapter is to identify the contours and patterns in the audience reception data, and to analyse similarities and differences of perception and practice in fan's interactions with the community regulations and their meanings. To be more specific, this chapter focuses on a number of divergent materials collected from the Baidu Tieba of *TVoC*, community regulations and rules made by Baidu Tieba and the *bazhu* of *TVoC*.

TVoC's *tieba* was founded in June 2012, with user being mainly from mainland China; it is still updating continually. Up to 28 Sep 2015 there were 686,292 topics and 25,938,805 posts in total. This *tieba* is divided into five zones: the posts zone (*kantie*, 看贴), which is constantly updated by members; the fan-created pictures zone (*tupian*, 图片), which includes photos and cartoon images of the show; the short videos zone (*shipin*, 视频); the quality posts zone (*jinpin*, 精品), i.e. those recommended by *bazhu*; and the chat room (*zuqun*, 组群), for small groups, where members can chat with others about shared interests and topics. In general, many original Baidu Tieba users would first visit the quality posts zone when they entered a community. It is the *bazhu*, which has the power to identify a post as a quality post. This helps to tag and

categorise valuable posts so that members can easily find relevant contents or related, and it is a way to encourage member engagement and participation.

In this chapter, I will first explain how Baidu Tieba works and in what ways fans can participate in the community and interact with each other. Then I will summarise the main themes from the data and discourses collected from Baidu Tieba of *TVoC*, exploring what kinds of content and posts placed in this community are in danger of potentially being removed and censored by the *bazhu*, or required to be 'deleted' by a normal fan. Within this community, fans of *TVoC* occupy a hierarchy of power. As Matt Hills (2002, p. 46) noted, fandom should be viewed as *'a social hierarchy where fans share a common interest while also competing over fan knowledge, access to the object of fandom, and status'*.

This hierarchy can be clearly identified in *TVoC* (2012)'s tieba in the way that fans comply with regulations and rules within the community. Andrea MacDonald's (1998) study of online fans provides an introduction to how hierarchy operates within fan culture and how media outlets regulate meaning through Internet settings. Furthermore, she provides a sensitive and detailed account of five dimensions of fan hierarchies: hierarchy of knowledge, hierarchy of fandom level, hierarchy of access, hierarchy of leaders and hierarchy of venue. She also argues that fans that are at the top of all five of these hierarchies are 'executive fans'. According to Matt Hills (2002), fans with very high cultural capital will become the 'executive fans', and will therefore also possess high levels of social capital. The notions of 'cultural capital' and 'social capital' originally come from Pierre Bourdieu's work 'Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste' (1984). Many scholars use them in the discussion of fan culture generally (Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 2006), as well as of the term 'subcultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1984; Thornton, 1997), which implies an assertion of difference and status which would not be recognised by the wider society, given the generally low cultural prestige of fan cultures

(Thomas, 2002). My intention here is to examine fans' knowledge, and the power relations among fans within *TVoC*'s online fan hierarchy.

7.2 Fandom within Baidu Tieba

For nearly a decade, more and more entertainment channels and faster and faster broadband networks have been developing in China. Stimulation of consumer society, the needs of the market, the rapid development of mass media, a more liberal cultural environment, the specific cultural needs of fan spaces and other factors, have together promoted the prosperity and development of fan culture in mainland China, as Liu Zhiyou and Zhao Zuo (2012) discovered. Fans are no longer just passive receiving audiences or mindless consumers, or enthusiastic participants. Fans are able to participate in the pleasure of being part of the process of creating fan culture and community and in this process positive fan culture can meet the psychological needs of fans.

As 'textual poachers' (Jenkins, 1992), fans may purposefully participate in media activities, creating a fan culture that is characterised by systematic production and transmission. On the other hand, as consumers in target markets, they help produce huge fan industries through their consuming potential and consuming behaviours. Cai Qi (2010) indicates that the fan economy in China is operated through two main strategies – the reproducing strategy of the cultural industry era and the integrating strategy of the media convergence era. It is a crucial distinctive aspect of the Chinese markets. This structure reflects a shift in the perception of fan culture within China's film and television industry and is indicative of the emerging industry's deeper penetration into fan communities and fan spaces.

There are many online sites in mainland China that offer users spaces to build fan communities, and of these Baidu Tieba is China's biggest online community. It has 12,797,295 communities, covering all aspects of entertainment, games, novels, and life style. In providing social networking

services, it can be said that Baidu is a community of communities, with most of those communities acting as online fandoms for entertainment media and popular culture worldwide. Baidu Tieba is a publicly accessible and searchable message-board system where specific boards (*tieba)* can be freely created by a registered user under a specific title. Although established in 2003, it is since the popularity if *Super Girl* in 2006 that Baidu Tieba has risen to prominence. Nowadays, Baidu Tieba has become an extremely popular and comprehensive forum, with a large number of active users posting their creative posts, replying to each other, and engaging in interactive activities. Overall, Baidu Tieba is perceived as the birthplace of online fan culture in mainland China.

Baidu Tieba can be accessed through its homepage on PCs, and there are also user access options for the service from mobile phones and tablets, enabling functions such as posting from multiple accounts at the same time. It provides users with query-based searchable communities for exchanging views and sharing knowledge and experiences. They are connected to Baidu's search engine, which, like Google, can link up to an enormous and ever-enlarging network of information. Baidu is China's largest commercial web portal, offering a search engine for websites, audio files and images.

Once a *tieba* is created, Baidu will index its name automatically and the contents within boards become easily searchable. The significance of Baidu Tieba lies in this function – it has abandoned the traditional mode of operation of discussion boards and become a group, a community, grouped around one keyword which could be a single idea, a person, show or event or a shared interest. In this way, it can keep people with the same interests connected, communicating and helping each other. It is in Baidu Tieba that millions of fans of TV dramas and films find *'families'* – self-styled communities – to share their interests with, and locating them is as easy as typing the title in the post bar window (Kong, 2012). Baidu Tieba has thereby encouraged participatory fandom. As Steven Duncombe (2012: p.1) explains it:

> Fandom provides a space to explore fabricated worlds that operate according to different norms, laws, and structures than those we

166

experience in our 'real' lives. Fandom also necessitates relationships with others: fellow fans with whom to share interests, develop networks and institutions, and create a common culture. This ability to imagine alternatives and build community, not coincidentally, is a basic prerequisite for political activism.

Duncombe's definition perfectly explains the Baidu Tieba fandom of self-identified fans who participate – as writers, artists, film-makers, organisers, community moderators, coders, archivists, bloggers, co-players, gif-makers, episode reviewers, fan work critics, fandom activists, and more – in some kind of fan culture. Generally speaking, to be a 'fan' is to *'negotiate meanings and interpret messages with others, to participate in a range of activities that extend beyond the private act of viewing and reflects an enhanced emotional involvement with a television narrative'* (Bielby, Harrington and Bielby, 1999: p. 35). The enhanced emotional involvement of fans refers to their becoming excessive readers, being discerning, critical and productive, and carrying out creative and interpretive practices.

Fans may *'lurk'* at *TVoC* (2012)'s Baidu Tieba everyday and browse through endless gossip about every tiny aspect of contestants' and judges' lives and discuss various social and personal issues. At the same time, fans may also write fan fiction and cultural criticism, produce fan art and videos, and seek out other fans with whom to share their enthusiasm and build groups and communities.

It is worth thinking about whom these fans browsing on Baidu Tieba spaces might be. According to statistics, Baidu Tieba has more than 60% users who were born in the post-90s, while 90% of users are under the age 34 (Zhang, 2015). The so-called post-90s generation in China has been stereotyped as *'lazy, promiscuous, confused, selfish, brain-damaged and overall hopeless'* (Farrar, 2010). They are the first generation that has grown up with the Internet, and they are also the most controversial generation in China. The post-90s generation constitutes the majority of active Internet users in China, and these are the media users who access popular cultural products (music/TV/films)

through the Internet rather than through conventional transmission vehicles (radio/TV/cinema).

Jonathan Noble (2012, p, 51) describes that while Chinese society worries a great deal about this generation, the post-90s generation sees itself as having such characteristics as *'a high aptitude to adapting to change'*, *'an interest in promoting one's individuality'*, *'a tendency to pursue hobbies that are not understood by adults'*, and *'growing up early'*. The Internet culture created by young Chinese audiences through thousands of members communicating, has adopted its own a special Internet language called *'Martian'*. The *'Martian'* dialect is essentially standard Mandarin written using the most obscure characters possible, which most closely identifies with the post-90s alternative subculture of *'brain-damaged writing'*. Speaking in the *'Martian'* dialect, fans can communicate more effectively on Baidu and enjoy the fact that their posts are *'not understood by the adults'*.

As previously mentioned, in recent years Baidu Tieba has been changed considerably to conform with China's Internet policies and media regulations. Since the end of 2010, Baidu Tieba only allows posting by registered account holders with username shown as the author, thus removing anonymous posting. Although anonymity may encourages more sensitive topics of discussion, the CCP would not allow the behaviour known as *'wangluo yuyan baoli'* (Internet verbal violence), such as flaming, trolling, hacking and any sort of 'trash-talk', all of which are considered uncivil. Baidu Tieba allows users posts limited to containing at most ten pictures and one video quoted from certain broadcast websites. Published posts cannot be edited but users can delete their own published posts and comments from other users relating to their posts.

In 2012 Baidu Tieba went through huge changes in its interface and functions. It changed from a simple reply-by-sequence user interface to a more complicated reply-in-same-floor version. Baidu Tieba's statistical counting system of 'reply-in-same-floor' (the nearest equivalent in a forum would be

'reply in same thread') posts is unique, so some associated terms need to be clarified before further exploration:

- *tiezi* (帖子): texts posted by users on website BBs as topics

- *lou* (楼): equivalent to the order of topic commenter within each *tiezi*: for instance, the 5ᵗʰ *lou* means the fifth message responding to a topic

- *louzhu* (楼主): a registered user who created the *tiezi* (topic) and *the fir*st one posted in the *lou*

- *gentiezhe* (跟帖者): registered members who post within certain tiezi, usually followed louzhu

- *bazhu* (吧主): community moderato

The 'reply-in-same-floor' posts system subdivides many roles and positions that different fan could take while they are communicating with each other. It is this system that allows the community to be more clearly classified in terms of power and hierarchy. For instance, a *louzhu* has the right to delete any posts related to their topics (*tiezi*), but under the censor of the *bazhu*.

Each *tieba* would have at least one, but no more than three, *bazhu*, and these acts as the regulator and moderators who formulate a series of rules and regulations. In *TVoC* (2012)'s *tieba*, the moderator community is called *bawu tuandui* (吧务团队, regulating team). In total 42 users together maintain and organise the community; three of them are elected and voted to be *bazhu*, 22 of them are *xiao bazhu* (associated moderators), and there are also eight candidates who self-nominate to join the *bawu tuandui*. This small group was established to manage the whole community of 905,728 fans. Fan members are known as *linghun gezhe* (灵魂歌者), which means 'the soul singers'. This is like a pun made about a celebrity's name and used to describe their fans.

The figure below shows the structure of the *bawu tuandui* who manage *TVoC*'s *tieba*, which has more than 900,000 fans and 25,881,662 posts.
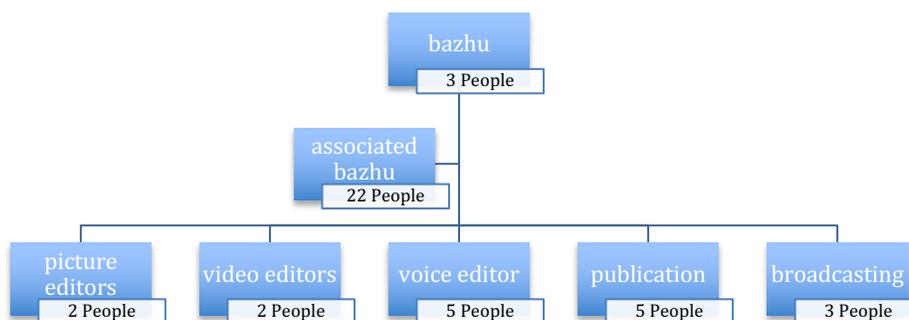
Figure 4. Bawu tuandui (moderator group) made up of 42 fans

Fans of *TVoC* are from different regions of China, have different cultural backgrounds, and are of different social classes. It is their common interest and enthusiasm for the television show and certain celebrities associated with it that has gathered them on Baidu Tieba. Through participating in discussions, sharing information and providing each with other help, they created a family-like community, and started to call each other *'qin'* (dear, 亲). In their participations and interactions, fans do not only share information but they also form common ideologies and values, and these meet individual's needs to achieve self-identification and pleasure.

Although fans are only allowed to post on Baidu Tieba using a registered account with its username shown, they give themselves special names in the community to identify themselves and their levels of fandom. Each *tieba* fan group has its own unique name to allow members to identify themselves as supporters of their fan object. These names can then be formed into various codes in discussions, such as fans giving nickname to their favourite stars. The shared codes they use within a community could hence create feelings in fans, such as group belonging.

Each *tieba* has its own organisational structure and core group (moderators group). Led by their own opinion leaders, *TVoC*'s *tieba* have been ensured normal operations under the subdivision functions of the core group

members (see Figure 1.). Moreover, each *tieba* has its own regulations that fans gradually comply with leading to the formation of habits and respect. Fans comply with the rules in order to integrate into to the bigger fan community/family, to acquire a group identity and a sense of belonging to certain groups. The next section will specify and examine the rules and regulations existing in *TVoC* (2012)'s tieba.

7.3 Baidu Tieba's exchange system and fan hierarchy

This chapter draws on Andrea MacDonald's work, which is itself influenced by Bourdieu via Hills and Jenkins. The approach here specifically uses the notion of 'fan hierarchy' adapted from Hills' book Fan Cultures, in which he suggests it is necessary 'to consider any given fan culture not simply as a community but also as a social hierarchy where fans share a common interest while also competing over fan knowledge, access to the object of fandom, and status' (2002, p. 46). While Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital has been widely applied by many academic critics, Hills suggests we should more explicitly analyse the social hierarchy of fandom, as the idea of cultural capital has been overly emphasised while social capital and symbolic capital have been underplayed in fan culture studies. Hills also points out that Bourdieu's 'dominant/subordinate' model is rather limited to 'read[ing] moral and aesthetic differences off from the master-grid of class difference' (2002, p. 64).

Building upon Hills' observations, this chapter explores the ways that fans engage with particular texts and engage with one another. Specifically it examines 1) ways in which hierarchies are established within and between the *Baidu tieba* fan communities of TVoC and 2) ways in which fans' different forms of capital shape the existing hierarchies within the communities. Bourdieu's theories on distinctions and capitals provide the theoretical foundation that can be applied to fan cultural studies. However, his theory is based on the class distinctions of Western capitalist societies, whereas in terms

of the case of *TVoC*'s online fan community in China, class difference is not the main discussion point of this thesis. Baidu Tieba allows fans to police/regulate other fans, and this has created a very different way for fans to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, and for the researcher to calculate the different types of capital created. Thus, the discussions of fan hierarchy in this chapter examine the applicability of Bourdieu's theories in the context of China.

In her article, 'Uncertain utopia: science fiction media fandom and computer-mediated communication', MacDonald (1998) observed that the community's determination of who is an authority coincides with the authority's position within various fan hierarchies. She notes that control over venue is important in establishing oneself at the top of the fan hierarchy, and this is indeed the case within *TVoC* (2012) fandom, in that the *bazhu,* who run message boards, can exercise control over the fans who frequent them. Baidu Tieba offers fans a system in which the *jingyanzhi* (经验值, credits for engagement) plays a significant role in regulating fan privileges and power. Through actively engaging on *tieba*, fans gain higher *jingyanzhi* and get the opportunity of becoming a *bazhu*. An example of a user gaining power and privilege via *jingyanzhi* is *allison1987*, who has been using Baidu Tieba for five years, has posted more than 50,000 posts, and is now one of *TVoC*'s *tieba bazhu*. This system of rewarding *jingyanzhi* allows fans to apply for the position of *bazhu* in a way similar to applying for a job. This process is specified by the Baidu Tieba *bazhu* policy:

> *Bazhu* are the core users of Baidu Tieba, chosen from hundreds of millions of enthusiastic users. They were selected according to certain criteria for approval by the official team. Their main roles are constructing content of interest, as well as administrating and regulating other users within each *tieba*.

This suggests that *bazhu* are at the top of the community hierarchy and exercise power and control over other fans. It also shows a relatively fair exchange system built on 'online engagement', '*jingyanzhi*' and 'levels and privileges'. *Jingyanzhi* is the intermediate indicator used to measure the

exchange relationship between 'online engagement' and 'levels and privileges'. Higher 'levels and privileges' need more *jingyanzhi* to exchange, as shown in Figure 2. The first column shows the levels (from 1 to 18), the second column shows the name of each level ('titles' given to the levels), and the third column tells how many credits (*Jingyanhi*) are needed for each level.

会员头衔&经验值对照表

级别	头衔	所需经验值	级别	头衔	所需经验值
1	靡靡之音 (1)	1	10	声出金石 (10)	2000
2	南腔北调 (2)	5	11	笙歌鼎沸 (11)	3000
3	瓮声瓮气 (3)	15	12	飞泉鸣玉 (12)	6000
4	四调不分 (4)	30	13	声震林木 (13)	10000
5	平淡无味 (5)	50	14	穿云裂石 (14)	18000
6	略有韵味 (6)	100	15	游响停云 (15)	30000
7	洋洋盈耳 (7)	200	16	歌遏行云 (16)	60000
8	婉转动听 (8)	500	17	余音绕梁 (17)	100000
9	清新入肺 (9)	1000	18	林籁泉韵 (18)	300000

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Figure 5. Exchanging jingyanzhi for 'levels and privileges'

This structure and system creates a number of levels and barriers to entry and 'promotion' between levels. Although the entry barrier is low for fans wanting to join a *tieba* and its community, it is not easy to complete the move from the 'edge' of the community to its centre, or from the bottom to the top. Gaining *jingyanzhi* certainly equates to vast amounts of time and energy in terms of fans' online activities and engagement, and demands their thought, talents and contributions. Once fans enter a *tieba*, while they participate and share with each other they are at the same time competing with each other for power and privileges.

After a considerable period of such competition, the internal structure of a *tieba* develops levels of differentiation, forming a pyramid structure from the bottom to the top – from the majority of 'ordinary' fans to a minority of

executive fans. At the bottom of the pyramid structure lies a large number of *qianshuizhe* (潜水者, *'diving viewer'*, lurker) and general supporters and in the middle of the structure there is a group of active and positive supporters, while at the top of the pyramid the community's opinion leaders and public figures often occupy an important and dominant position.

Thus, within this structure and system, each fan can gain a title (social identity within this group) and a relevant level, depending on their contribution of fan labour, the information and resources they have, and their communication skills. For instance, when users log in to Baidu Tieba, the system will show them their *jingyanzhi*, title and level. In the case of *TVoC*'s *tieba*, fans can earn a higher level and more prestigious title in the community through accumulating more *jingyanzhi,* which reflects their engagement and experience in the community. The figure below shows columns for the 18 levels and the rows show the various privileges available to users at each level, and the required amount of *jingyanzhi* corresponding to each. The higher the level fans achieve, the more power and privileges they will have, including the right to speak, to get closer to industry information and celebrities, the power to guide public opinion and the opportunity to vote.

上古之战	申请吧主	发起投票	多媒体贴子	特权表情
吧等级身份	申请吧主	发起投票	多媒体贴子	特权表情
关注后可获得等级头衔，并随着你在本吧的经验不断提升。	获得申请本吧吧主的资格。	本吧投票区发起投票，由你引起民意的浪潮。	发帖时可使用"音乐"、"视频"让贴子动起来。	可使用等级特权表情，让你的贴子个性十足。

等级与特权一览表

| 特权	未关注	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
等级头衔	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
免验证码	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
投诉优先处理	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
插入音乐	×	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
插入视频	×	×	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
语音贴	×	×	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
发起投票	×	×	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
高级表情	×	×	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
涂鸦	×	×	×	×	×	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
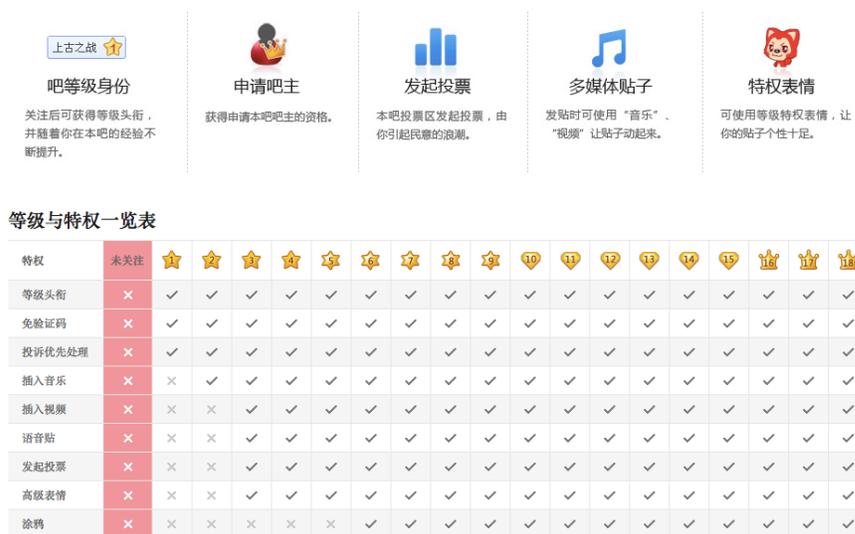
Figure 6. Hierarchies and equivalent privileges

It can be suggested that the subcultural capital of fans is dependent on the amount of knowledge of the fan object that the fan possesses. As John Fiske has noted, fan knowledge 'serves to distinguish within the fan community. The experts – those who have accumulated the most knowledge – gain prestige within the group and act as opinion leaders. Knowledge, like money, is always a source of power' (Fiske, 1992, p. 43). Within Baidu Tieba, *jingyanzhi* can be seen as a way of measuring fan knowledge, and then using it to allow them to gain status and prestige within the fan community, as it calculated based on the number and quality of posts made, and other aspects of online engagement. Fans who eagerly collect and display their knowledge acquire a way to display their subcultural capital and to accrue power over less 'educated' fans. The achievement of higher community status by some fans indicates that they are more knowledgeable than others.

7.4 Power relations and TVoC (2012)'s *tieba* regulations

When fans actively engage with others in the same community, they have already started an internal competition over identity, status, power and hierarchy. Baidu Tieba, as a traditional virtual community space, has a social hierarchy where fans share a common interest while also competing over fan knowledge, access to the object of fandom, and status. In a study of online '*Buffy*' fandom, Rebecca Williams has examined the spoiler sources that allowed executive fans to post spoiler information online and thus act as a conduit between fans and the TV industry. The idea of executive fans being able to exercise power over other fans through control of knowledge as their subcultural capital and social constraints as their social capital (Williams, 2004), can be clearly seen in Baidu Tieba's integrated system. *Bazhu,* as the executive fans (although not the owners of the website), are empowered to strictly govern topics of conversation and control debate through 'benign dictatorships' (Smith and Kollock, 1999, p. 5). By making regulations and rules for *TVoC*'s *tieba*,

executive fans are perfectly justified in exercising control with the informed consent of other fans.

Overall, the restrictions, curtailments and rewards within *TVoC*'s *tieba* target three aspects of control: *shantie* (删帖, deleting posts), *fenghao* (封号, closing Baidu accounts), and *jiajin* (加精, selecting quality posts). All of those regulations and rules were made by the show's *baizu* and reflect a stringent list of banned topics, including discussion of politics, religion, eroticism, privacy invasion and humiliating quarrels. Almost all fans will consciously comply with these rules, as this complicity constitutes a means of showing respect to their fan objects and achieving a sense of identification with certain celebrities.

Although *bazhu* hold the highest level of power within a fan community/hierarchy, it is the central government's political requirements which overlay all the rules made by them, and these requirements are aimed at protection on the one hand but censorship on the other. In relation to the former, the Chinese government has recently imposed strict new policies seeking to protect young people from pornography, violence, superstition, and 'pernicious information'. In terms of censorship, however, these requirements are a way for government to strongly maintain Internet safety, but for primarily political reasons. Almost every *tieba's* first rule requires fans not to violate the law, public morality, and the Baidu Tieba Agreement. The Baidu Tieba Agreement, in compliance with CCP policies, contains 52 restrictions on users' online behaviour, guiding 'the right way' for reading a text, interpreting meanings, online communication language and so on (Jenkins, 1992, p. 86). Baidu holds a very strong position in requiring its users' obedience:

> If you have any challenges to the provisions of this agreement, you can choose not to enter Baidu Tieba; when you enter Baidu Tieba it means that you will agree to comply with all requirements under this Agreement, and fully subject to the unified management under Baidu Tieba.

Most regulations are concerned with national security and the regime; Baidu Tieba requires users to follow the government's policy of 'seven bottom lines of Internet civilization' which must be adhered to, these being: laws and

regulations, the socialist system, national interests, citizens' legitimate rights and interests, public order, social morality and authenticity of information. In another words, each *tieba* follows this agreement via the actions of the *bazhu,* who are responsible for enforcing, regulating and making appropriate fan interpretations. The system itself empowers the executive fans, not only by recognising and developing their knowledge, but also by giving them the *'ability to determine who is and is not worthy of participation'* in a community group (Macdonald, 1998, p. 86).

Jenkins (1992) has explained fandom as interpretative communities *'where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated and negotiated'*, an explanation which gives no consideration to the external forces coming from government and industry promoters. In certain ways, the executive fans, *bazhu,* can stifle some aspects of fan discussions and interpretations. For instance, any *tieba* accounts deemed to be *'in relation to racism of the minority group and anti-government'* would be censored by being closed down. If one contestant of *TVoC* (2012) comes from Tibet and so identifying themselves as from the *Zhuang* group (a minority ethnic group), fans cannot debate and discuss about that contestant as such discussion might involve issues such as the tense relationship between the CCP and Tibet.

In addition to censoring, *bazhu* also have the power to positively guide what fans should do, as well as making rules on 'flaming' (arguing online) and 'netiquette' (appropriate online behaviour). Posts would be taken into consideration for 'deleting' if someone uses *'uncivilised language to verbally abuse or insult others'*, or if there are *'too many posts on the same topic within one day'*. More specifically *TVoC'*s *tieba* rules require that *'fans'* community ID photos should not contain any filthy, erotic, horror or sensitive political information'*. In order to maintain the quality of the *tieba*, it has also been announced that *bazhu* will deleted some *'tiezi* with few replies, barely any

meaning, no substantial content or timeliness*'. Fans have varying levels of understanding of 'good' or 'bad' netiquette.

The question is, to what extent and in which ways can *bazhu* stimulate or stifle fan discussion in regard to fans' different interpretations. Williams has examined executive fans' ability to *'attempt to gain further fan social capital through their online participation, with the ultimate goal being to attain discursive power and achieve the position of being able to control fan discussion to enforce their own interpretations through their subcultural capital'* (Williams, 2004, p.3). Williams concludes that fans' discursive power and subcultural capital decide the extent of their control over other fans. Standing as they do between industry sources and other fans, *bazhu* can even require that other fans must mark and indicate posts by using the term 'spoiler source' in the headline when posting any spoiler information, such as competition results. They are not completely forbidding other fans' discussions and behaviours, but they are controlling and regulating them in line with certain standards which they themselves have made.

The CCP's political impact on *tieba,* regulations over the power of *bazhus*, and influence and interference from industry promoters also need to be discussed. As stated by Brown (1994, p. 132), the *'control of knowledge is a major form of social power'* and in this regard *bazhu* are likely to have the highest level of fan social capital, through their connections with Baidu's official management team and industry sources (promoters). However, the following interesting example shows obvious industry guidance and penetration into the fan community. There is one particular rule which *bazhu* emphasise:

> *TVoC* (2012) is officially licensed by the Netherlands' programme *The Voice,* and is the only such show with *The Voice* copyright in China. Any posts which slander the show in regard to issues of plagiarism and piracy would be deleted without notice.

This tone of this rule sounds as though it originates from industry people who are trying to influence audiences' understanding and interpretation of text. Further examples also evidence such input into *bazhu* rules:

TVoC (2012) will be in peaceful coexistence with other Zhejiang TV television programmes and those of other TV stations. Posts will be deleted if they excessively belittle other programmes.

Rather than being subject to the directly stated intentions of industry promoters, rules and regulations imposed by *bazhu* are far more convincing and acceptable for fans. *Bazhu* can be popular because of their high social capital, gained from daily communication with other fans, such as regular posting and even personal message communications. To a greater or lesser extent, fans may have respect for these executive fans who are more knowledgeable than they are and have higher subdural capital and fan social capital. In contrast fans might be easily disgusted by industry interference and promotional resources.

7.5 Challenging the power: Fan resistance

Rebecca Williams notes how powerful an executive fan - the well-known 'spoiler fan'– can be in a fan hierarchy. Comparatively, she also mentions '*a fan banned from a message board quickly loses his social standing within the fan community and may find himself ostracized from numerous other sites*' (Williams, 2004). However, in the case of TVoC's *tieba*, the situation is somewhat different. The less powerful fans have been given opportunities to defend and explain themselves in relation to posts deleted by *bahzu*. *TVoC*'s *tieba bazhu* open up a 'floor' '*shantie fenghao publicity floor* (删帖封号公示楼)' to explain the reason why a post has been deleted or an account closed. Only within this floor (which resembles a 'thread' on a standard forum), are fans allowed to negotiate around their interpretations of censorship, or discuss the *tieba* rules made by *bazhu*.

Struggling to express themselves, caught as they are between the influences of industry promoters and community regulations, fans of *TVoC* seek ways to break and challenge 'rules' and hierarchy. These include expressing and discussing their discontent and resistive receptions with others; appealing to be fairly treated within the community; and reporting and complaining about

others' potentially harmful posts and requiring them to be removed. Although *bazhu* hold the dominant position in the *tieba* hierarchy, the other fans are actively seeking greater levels of fan 'discursive power', and challenging the regulations and fan hierarchy, by showing their increasing 'social capital'.

In the resistance process, some other fans use their knowledge of political policies and *tieba* regulations to defend for themselves. They are intentionally aiming to increase their power and capital so that can reach a higher position within the fan community. Jenkins has recognised the importance of knowledge, stating that *'within the informational economy of the net, knowledge equals prestige, reputation, power. Knowledge gains currency through its circulation on the net'* (1995, p. 59). The more a fan is familiar with the regulations and rules, the more likely he or she is to have developed an approach which accords in some respects with the community's hierarchy, and which will allow them, therefore, to exercise some power over the moderator group. For instance one fan, @lwchwqq, states:

> Can somebody explain to me why my post 'As a singer, can Wu Mochou finally be the champion after ten years?' has been deleted? Here is the *tieba* rules I found and I have carefully studied the rules and regulations that are publicised in the *tieba*. However I didn't see any rules that my post appears to violate or go against (5 April 2014, 17:31 p.m.).

After several rounds of communication and negotiation, one *bazhu* released this post from the black list, while admitting that *'the moderator group has been too strict and sensitive about the content'*. Whether a censored post will be released from a ban actually depends on the bargaining process of fans' interpretations of the rules and the issues, in another word, on their knowledge.

Some fans who challenge the interpretations of *tieba* regulations and appeal to be fairly treated within the community will also use their knowledge of political policies and *tieba* regulations to help other fans who are in similar situations and difficulties. Thus a fan, by challenging the rules, is also increasing their social capital, as they then get support from other fans with whom they have resonance. It is their discussions and cooperation that would

together challenge the *bazhu's* power position and authority. Greater group social capital resources lead to greater group power that they can wield against the dominant power and the interpretations of text meanings. As fans declare:

> As a country has state laws, the *tieba* also has its rules, and now that we were forbidden free speech we must be given reasons. Please inform us of the reason for being banned. If it is reasonable, we certainly will accept it. However, if the forbidden [post] does not breach the rules, we will complain to the end.

These fans were speaking as a group, considerably united, which challenged the moderator group, the dominant level of the fan hierarchy. Therefore, although *bazhu* seem to have the most power in the fan hierarchy, they continually maintain the community with the help of other moderators, together seeking higher levels of discursive power, subcultural capital and fan social capital.

As explored, *bazhu* may have the highest level of power, but other fans are also simultaneously challenging their authorities, seeing them as helpless deceitful watchdogs. Many fans are uncomfortable with *bazhu* and the moderator group explicitly acting like authorised professionals by showing off their knowledge and subcultural capital. For instance, one fan complained that:

> This is just a post for passers-by to leave their complaints and comments. I wondered why those slanderous posts in the music *tieba* were not deleted, whereas this post, which was just for fun, was deleted? I seriously doubt that the administrator who deleted my post is a fan of a contestant. For his own ends he violated the fair principle of this *tieba,* abusing public power. So unprofessional! This is a kind of behaviour that pushes out opponents and forces others' opinions' (20 August 2013, 14:35 p.m.).

Fans were showing their dismissive and resentful feelings, trying to question and to challenge the *bazhu's* legitimacy and authority. When it comes to fans' favourite objects, their resistance can be even fiercer and they will use offensive and aggressive language in a way to satirise the *bazhu's* rights, position and power of authority:

> @JSHY631: As I am in the black list all the time, I really want to discuss with the brain-damaged *bazhu* some issues regarding teenagers' culture and philosophy of life (13 July 2013, 01:35 a.m.)

This is intriguing as it suggests that a *bazhu* is a brain-damaged person, which can harm and damage the enthusiasm of fans that participate in this community. This statement suggests that the *bazhu* and moderator team are in some way reprehensible and that the *'victim'* fans are innocent in this demanding environment of network and political pressures.

Although the mass of fans, in comparison to *bazhu*, have less subcultural capital, fan social capital, and less fan 'discursive power', they have been given opportunities and pathways to resist and challenge the dominant groups within the fan culture. And as explored in a previous section, some fans to some extent have a respect for these executive fans who are more knowledgeable than they are, and have greater fan social capital. However, when the situation becomes an extreme quarrel on censorship, to some other fans the executive fans are perceived as *'abusing fan power'*, *'less knowledgeable in fan culture'*, *'using double standard on regulating'*, *'being retaliative and selfish'*, or even being guilty of *'dereliction of their duty within the community'*. This would suggest that the contradiction between fans and the moderator group is irreconcilable, and not just in *TVoC*'s *tieba,* as Baidu Tieba's *jingyanzhi* exchange system has advanced and empowered executive fans into the dominant positions.

In summary, this chapter has explored the online fan community of *TVoC* (2012), suggesting that hierarchies do indeed exist within *Baidu Tieba*. Through Internet-based communication, users are able to come together over a wide variety of topics and interests, in addition to overcoming geographical distance (Baym, 2007), leading to the formation of online fan communities. Thus to explore fan communities, discussions around hierarchy and power seems inevitable, as many other scholars have agreed (Thornton, 1996; Macdonald, 1998; Hills, 2002; Williams, 2004). Within the fan hierarchy of *TVoC*'s *tieba*, it is the *bazhu* who hold the dominant position in the fan community, as they have greater subcultural capital, social capital and discursive power. The *jingyanzhi* (*credits*) exchange system empowers fairly,

and ensures executive fans the greatest levels of power and position in regulating the rest of the fans' online behaviour, discussion and interpretations of texts. However, this research is obviously restricted to one qualitative research method only, the audience reception method, and this chapter has used that method to look into what fans have said and done, and attempted to interpret the meanings drawn from the viewpoints of critical scholars. To further understand how fans view their own status and power, parallel interviews with particular fans, or discourse analysis of online postings, may be needed to substantiate my research. This critical analysis of the ways in which fan hierarchy and power have been affected and exercised by *TVoC* fans' engagement on Baidu Tieba, in relation to Chinese government political policy guidance and industry interference, could provide further insights into issues of fan community, power and hierarchy which fall outside Western research.

Chapter 8: From Strategies to Tactics: Fan Productivity and Creativity within Baidu Tieba for *The Voice Of China (2012)*

Tactics can never fully overcome strategy; yet the strategies cannot prevent the tactician from striking again.

– Henry Jenkins (1992)

8.1 Introduction

The previous chapter explored the fan community and hierarchy of *TVoC* (2012) within Baidu Tieba (*tieba*), where executive fans (*bazhu*) have dominant power over other fans, as they regulate the content and meanings of posted text to control the information flow in the space. The regulations and rules made by *bazhu* contain a stringent list of banned topics, including discussion of politics, religion, eroticism, privacy invasion, and humiliating quarrels. This chapter moves on to look at how fans within such a community actively resist such control by 'poaching' and appropriating cultural texts in creative ways.

The aim of this chapter is twofold: firstly to explore to what extent *TVoC* fans engaged with the show tactically and creatively within Baidu Tieba, and, more importantly, to what ends they practiced their creativity. This chapter will examine examples from *TVoC*'s *tieba*, focusing on the main themes of fan creativities and the ways in which fans practiced their productive works. It also explores not only the enthusiasm of the fandom of *TVoC* (2012), but also the purposes of their fan creativities, based on the affective bond between fan and fan object and the impact of these on the substance of participation and interactive support. Although Baidu Tieba is a space where fans' engagements were highly censored and regulated, fans could practice creativities at the micro level, as a form of resistance from the bottom of the power hierarchy.

First of all, this chapter will briefly review and apply Michel de Certeau's notion of 'strategies and tactics' to fan creativity. Then, it will pinpoint the themes and patterns apparent within fan creativities on *TVoC*'s *tieba* that differentiate their particular fandom identities from those of other fans or non-fans. It will focus on examples of fans' engagement, such as fan fiction, fan art, creating videos and gifs, character analysis and fan criticisms. The regulations imposed within Baidu Tieba, which were investigated in the previous chapter, can be seen as examples of 'strategy' (de Certeau, 1984) as mediated by the *bazhu* from their position of strength, employing the property and authority that belonged exclusively to the literary 'landowners' (Jenkins, 1992, p. 45) of *TVoC (2012)*.

In contrast to the concept and practice of 'strategy', this chapter is interested in exploring the notion of 'tactics' (de Certeau, 1984) employed from the bottom up, where fans within Baidu Tieba practiced creativity in resisting government regulations and media censorship. Drawn from de Certeau's notion of strategies and tactics, and fan studies and subcultural studies (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1997; Jenkins, 1992; Scott, 2008, 2013; Sandvoss, 2011; Crawford, 2012; Hartley, 2012; Salkowitz, 2012), this chapter explores two tactics identified as fan creativities within *TVoC*'s Baidu Tieba: *e gao* (online spoofs) as a new subcultural phenomenon and *tu cao* (fan criticism) as collective resistance by fans. The terms '*e gao*' and '*tu cao*' will be explained in detail in the following sections.

Both are Chinese terms used to describe particular fan creativities within Chinese online cultures. The English translations provided for them cannot fully explain their meanings and uses by Chinese audiences. In order to understand fan creativities among Chinese online fan communities, this chapter suggests that these two phenomena are the major fan practices which need to be addressed and discussed.

8.2 Application of 'tactics' to fan creativity

By tactics, this chapter refers to de Certeau's (1984) notion that everyday creativity proliferates in minute discursive practices, but is simultaneously disciplined by macro-structural forces. Strategies and tactics, as two forms of power, are the terms used by de Certeau to explain the resistance and power relations between producer and consumer. According to de Certeau (1984, p. 38), strategies 'are actions within a place of power that have enforced systems of distribution' and the systems referred to include institutions, organisations and authorities who utilise their power to shape, direct, or control the behaviour of individuals. Tactics are applied by individuals who then appropriate the products of such strategic authority for their own ends.

Drawing on the Certeau's binary of strategic and tactical reading and poaching of texts, Jenkins suggests that 'tactics can never fully overcome strategy; yet the strategies cannot prevent the tactician from striking again' (1992, p. 45). As interpreted by Jenkins (1992), tactics belong to the mobile population of the dispossessed and the powerless, gaining in speed and mobility what they lack in stability. Such concepts have also been employed by media studies scholars to explain the relationship between media producers and consumers. Paul Booth (2008) claims that producers and consumers are at war with one another over meaning, and suggests that the strategies of the producer determine the tactical uses of media. While producers encode meaning through strategies of power, consumers tactically decode their own meanings (Hall, 1980). Nevertheless, this chapter goes beyond the encoding/decoding model in understanding the tactics of fans' online engagement. It aims to unfold the fan creativity and resistance which resides within the Baidu Tieba space.

Fans will initially consume text, as suggested by Booth (2008), and then they may 'poach' text (Jenkins, 1992), reinterpret it (Baym, 2000), or make 'a tactical response' to it (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995). The new media technology represented by Web 2.0 has given rise to the theory and practice of user-

186

generated content (known as UGC) which has become a new style of media culture − participatory culture. When fan groups entered the new media age, they quickly become a prime force in the first wave of participatory culture. Fans use texts to create something entirely different by combining and reworking them; they use digital technology to create, to change, to appropriate, to poach, and to write. Jenkins describes fans/readers not simply as poachers, but also as 'nomads' who are always in movement, 'not here or there', not constrained by permanent property ownership but rather constantly advancing upon another text, appropriating new materials, and making new meanings (1992, p.36). Thus, the boundary between producer and consumer is now blurring, allowing fans to produce their work based upon their own interpretations within fan community cultures.

Fandom has become a participatory culture that transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed into the production of new cultures and new communities (Hills, 2002). Within *TVoC*'s Baidu Tieba, fans actively updated posts with their creations of fan fiction, fan art, folk songs and fan videos, which not only appeared to demonstrated their fan identities but also their resistance to the cultural power of media authorities. However, this chapter is not aimed at arguing about the 'democratised fan creativity' which has become ubiquitous in Western countries, but rather at exploring fan creativity and productivity within the restrained and regulated space of fandom which exists in China, suggesting that fans are not only a spur for a deeper appreciation of the original text, but also that they use knowledge and criticism in making an effort to challenge the existing authority and regulation.

This chapter suggests that in the case of *TVoC*'s *teiba,* the strategies applied from the top of the hierarchy were the *jingyanzhi (经验值, credits)* exchange system and the *tieba* regulations which were put in place by authority powers. Simultaneously, fans were able to tactically respond to these strategies through their 'movements that change the organization of a space' (de Certeau,

1984, p. 38). Here, Baidu Tieba as a space full of tactical movements, used and customised by active fans who remade them into what they needed in order to subvert and divert the dominant power through their own conceptual, creative and political practices. The ability of the fans to change the organisation of the online space was primarily achieved by their practices and creativity. From this stance it is possible to state that readers and fans might fight from a position of power and authority relative to media regulators, in order to create for themselves a level of freedom of movement at the expense of acquiring resources. Indeed fans' tactical and creative practices are determined by the strategies upon which they are based.

8.3 *E gao (online spoofs) as a New Subcultural Phenomenon*

This section will explore and examine how *TVoC* (2012)'s fans practiced creativity in the form of *e gao* (online spoofs) within the Baidu Tieba space. The *e gao* phenomenon began to emerged on the Chinese Internet in 2006. The first well-known example was a 20-minute video spoof entitled *A Bloody Case over a Steamed Bun*. This was a video made by Hu Ge, a sound engineer and freelancer, in response to Chinese film director Chen Kaige's blockbuster film *Promise* (Wuji). *Promise,* which was released in 2005, topped all previous domestic blockbusters, with a budget of ¥300 million ($37.5 million). Hu Ge made the spoof video in order to express his extreme disappointment with this heavily promoted film which had been aimed at winning box office success across East Asia. The spoof contained a mixture of comic text and subversive criticism of political and social issues in China. Soon after *A Bloody Case over a Steamed Bun* became popular on the Internet, Chinese video satire came to widespread domestic and international attention (Meng, 2011).

This section will not focus on professional *e gao* works produced by professional practitioners, these being extreme cases that have had evident social influences. However, in recent years, new technologies and the Internet

188

have greatly reduced the barriers to production and distribution, hence gradually lowering the threshold for more general participation in online *e gao* production. The lower barrier to entry has expanded access to innovative and creative ideas, aided by easier ways to employ new technologies, such as simplified editing software. It can be said that *e gao* has become a subcultural phenomenon in China which has flooded the online space and which deconstructs serious themes to entertain people with comic effect, 'characterised by humour, revelry, subversion, grassroots spontaneity, defiance of authority, mass participation and multi-media high-tech' (Huang, 2006).

In *TVoC (2012)*'s Baidu Tieba, the search engine service allows searches for key words, to trace back existing posts within each *tieba*. The search results for '*e gao*' show that more than 4,239 posts involved *e gao* topics and 200 of them had '*e gao*' in the title, as named by the fans who had posted and identify their works as such. While acknowledging *e gao* as a subcultural phenomenon that disseminates individuality, satirises society, subverts classic texts, and deconstructs tradition, most Chinese scholars seem to hold essentially negative positions and critical views of *e gao* culture. Professor Wen Rumin from Peking University argues that the deconstruction and subversion of classic texts despises, distorts and profanes authority and tradition. He believes that the *e gao* phenomenon, incorporated into the world of business, will lead Chinese society towards cultural degeneration. Researcher Xu Youyu appeals for the establishment of a certain moral 'bottom line' for online *e gao*. Moreover, Professor Zheng Yuanzhe sees *e gao* culture as nothing but the netizen's carnival, releasing public spirits, but as briefly as fireworks. Scholar Cai Qi examines and explains the resistance to *e gao* culture and argues it is only a ceremonial form of resistance, as it faces structural constraints from political and economic forces, suppression by the current mainstream ideology, political incorporation and commercial culture incorporation. In most of these studies, *e gao* neither qualify as rational debates aiming to achieve consensus nor have they produced any visible policy consequences. But they constitute a significant

component of civic culture that offers both political criticism and emotional bonding for participants in China. What is less discussed is how since 2006 the *e gao* culture has become embedded into Chinese fan culture as part of everyday fan practices.

In considering suppression by mainstream ideology and political incorporation, it can be seen that the *e gao* phenomenon sparks fear in the heart of the CCP's concern with its regime and maintaining '*hexie shehui*' (harmonious society). Consequently, the SAPPRFT and the Ministry of Information Industry reacted to the *e gao* phenomenon in an attempt to establish an effective monitoring system of online audio-video production. The SAPPRFT issued 'Regulations on Administration of Internet-based Audio-Video Program Services' (互联网视听节目服务管理规定) applying from 31 January 2008, which allows only state-owned or state-controlled companies to operate audio-video websites and requires all existing audio-video websites to obtain renewable licenses. Hu Qiheng, the head of the China Internet Association, even claims that *e gao* (online spoofs) of the 'red classics' (红色经典) and 'traditional culture' (传统文化) cannot be tolerated as they will hurt the nation's feelings. Such grandiloquent speech about national feelings indicates the concerns of the Chinese elite, who may not always fully understand (or be willing to understand) the grassroots level of participation as well as the political expression involved. In the face of censorship, the *e gao* phenomenon has gradually becomes an alternative means of 'conducting political discussions using entertainment discourses' in post-socialist Chinese society, as Meng Bingchun (2011, p. 34) has claimed.

This thesis would argue that the *e gao* phenomenon has not disappeared or been undermined by policy restrain, but rather has becoming more ubiquitous and pervasive, as a form of online fan practice that is full of interconnected creativity and tactical resistance. In contrast to most of the claims in the literature reviewed above, this thesis believes it is necessary to re-examine *e gao* culture by taking into account burgeoning online fandom and

fan creativity, adopting as it does the form and political implications of *e gao* in the digital environment.

To focus on Chinese fans' online creativity requires some sense of what *e gao* is as a new kind of subcultural phenomenon, and how Chinese fans practice *e gao* culture. In this respect, this thesis will explore the meaning of *e gao* and how it has developed since 2006 in China. The character for '*e*' means 'evil,' and for '*gao*' means 'to make fun of'. By combined these two words, the phrase created is a new multi-media expression that makes fun of original works, often with malicious intent. It can be traced to the Japanese concept of '*kuso*', an Internet subculture that deconstructs serious literature or artistic materials to entertain people. Following the arrival of this Japanese subculture in mainland China in 2002, its meaning and political implications shifted towards tactical resistance by way of appropriation, imitation, parody, irony and resignification of existing cultural texts.

In recent years the range of online spoof objects has been widened, and is no longer limited to 'red classics' and traditional culture, but has extended to high school textbooks, historical heroes, reality television, pop music, movies, film stars and news presenters. Moreover, the practice of *e gao* has diversified into not only the format of video, but also to the photoshopping of pictures, gifs, art, fiction, digital memes etc.

Posted on 14 November 2013 at *TVoC*'s Baidu Tieba, fan Xiadelan created an online video spoof of *TVoC (2012)*. Adopting the formatted narrative of *TVoC (2012)*, this 7-minute video spoof turned the original contestants into comic characters from *One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes* (十万个冷笑话), a series of Chinese comics that consisted of several parodies of classic animations and comics, mostly from China and Japan, but also included some Western fairytales, as well as some original mini-series. In the spoof, the original texts of the judges and their facial expressions and conversations were montaged and re-contextualised. In summary, the primary target of this spoof was the show,

and it compounded various trending discussion topics and issues on the Internet around *TVoC* (2012).

It made an obvious contrast between the poor, 'talented' contestants and the over-performing judges. First of all, the programme replaces the original contestants with three comic characters with different background stories and dreams: Niuren (牛人), Huluxiongdi (葫芦兄弟), and Xiaolong (小龙). In order to interpret the fan resistance evidenced in the online video spoof, this chapter will textually analyse two of the comic contestants in detail: Niuren and Xiaolong. The first 'contestant' – a comic ox – sings Michael Jackson's well-known song *'Beat it'* completely out of tune; he was introduced in the programme as follows:

> The first contestant comes from the other side of the Pacific Ocean, the *niuren* (the ox man) Andy. He has been always hoping his mother would get to see him singing on the stage while he has been away from home and has worked hard for this for years. Today Andy comes to *The Voice of China*, he wants to sing for his mother, and sing for his distant relatives across the ocean. Hope they all will be proud of Andy.

Figure 7. First contestant (*niuren*) of the video spoof

This description of Andy in this introduction is as a *niuren* (牛人) which comes from the other side of the Pacific Ocean. The Chinese character *niuren* (牛人) literally means 'the ox man'. But the Chinese connotation of this term also

means to praise a person's ability and talent. In contrast to his status, Andy's singing of Jackson's song *'Beat it'* is absolutely not 'talented', as his voice was out of tune and his words unclear. In response to Andy's performance, the four judges gave him considerable affirmation and encouragement. The video spoof mix cut some of the most exaggerated facial expressions and performances of the judges.

The satire here aimed to create new meanings to criticise the judges' artificial performances and professional music commentary through the combined effect of comic presentation and subtly changed lyrics, from 'beat it' to 'be lie'. It also reflects the voice of most of the audiences, who think the contestants' personal stories are deliberately arranged by the production team. As many contestants come to the stage to 'sing for his mother, sing for the distant relatives', or sing for their father or a deceased person, the judges give them a pass, even if their singing is terrible. This plot represents the opinions of a large group of audiences and fans who think the four judges are performing in the show through expressing their compassion and concern. It reflects issues around contestants' touching stories or even possibly 'cheating' stories, stories which had been widely discussed on the Internet and had turned out to be industry-manipulated fakes. The background story of Andy epitomises many other contestants who had been criticised by audiences as winning by selling stories rather than through their real talent for singing. This online spoof demonstrated fans' ability to discern the 'truth' rather than simply accept what they were given to watch, as well as their resistance to mainstream commercial culture and ideologies.

The last 'contestant' is a popular game character called Xiaolong who in the video sang the song *I love you* from a Hong Kong comedy martial arts movie *The Eagle Shooting Heroes* (1993). With the four judges collectively standing up and emotionally applauded for Xiaolong, the competition ends with a cliched 'happy ending'. With a ridiculing tone, the spoof introduced him as:

> Xiaolong is not coming from a noble family. He gained people's recognition and expectations through his hard work and effort. Can he

prove his own worth through singing tonight? Will he have a magnificent transfiguration after his hard work? He has been highly anticipated…

Figure 8. Contestant Xiaolong singing *I Love You*

'Hard working boy', 'born of ordinary', and 'the competition song', the fragmented information collaged together is alluding to one real contestant in the first season of *TVoC*, Liang Bo, who was the champion of the competition with his singing of a 'red song', *I love you China*.

Two main points emerge from this statement: first, it intentionally addresses Xiaolong's family background as 'not a noble family'. As Liang Bo was crowned for his rendition of this song, there were many gossip stories about his background on the Internet. Many audiences questioned his victory and thought his success was due to his father's sponsorship of the show. Although this rumour has since been proved to be false, it did reflect Chinese audiences' doubt and distrust of the authenticity and fairness of the programme, and the dominant media. Second, the storyline invokes a scene of the finale with Liang Bo singing *I love you China* in rock style. As discussed in Chapter 6, the song *I love you China* is not a typical 'red song', but it indeed shows the intention of the production company of *TVoC* to be 'politically correct'; and it also demonstrates the smooth operation of ideological control in today's China.

Nevertheless, the spoof video and statement demonstrate that Chinese audiences are disgusted with the text of patriotism. The satire made here by fans is intended to ironically express their dislike of such deliberate imposition of ideological control in popular culture artefacts.

By mixing together images and characters from some very well-known cultural products with the typical narrative and style of *TVoC*, while making constant reference to relevant issues that had already been discussed on the Internet by audiences, this online video spoof successfully creates a comic yet creative text that ridicules the programme. In this way, and to a certain degree, *e gao* allows fans to be more creative in creating indirect political implications through their subcultural capital.

New technologies allows more ordinary people to engage with this kind of (sub)cultural production. Thus, many scholars believe *e gao* has empowered grassroots audiences and given them voices to express concerns which are often neglected by the mainstream media. In Alexander Lugg's examination of Chinese video spoofs, he suggests the *e gao* phenomenon can be understood in terms of James C. Scott's 'weapons of the weak' and Václav Havel's 'power of the powerless', as they could disturb the hierarchical status quo of the Chinese media (Lugg, 2013). The form of video spoofs allows fans to creatively express discontent with a range of government policies and political–social issues.

The state broadcaster, China Central Television (CCTV), generally perceived as full of ideology-driven indoctrination (Meng, 2011, p, 42), has been criticised and satirised by many fans. CCTV's famous news report programme, *China Legal Reports*, is probably the most targeted object of video spoofs. Adopting the standardised tone and traditional style of typical CCTV news reporting that any Chinese audience could easily identify, fans make video spoofs to target political and social issues that may arouse collective resonances among users of the Internet in China. In this respect, *e gao* indeed allows Chinese netizens to reclaim expressive space in Chinese–language cyberspace. And its meaning seems to be shifting from personal engagement

with popular culture into political criticism. In regard to *TVoC*, fans adopted its name (directly translated as *China Good Voice*) and format to create many video spoofs relating to social issues. For instance, *China Good Vacation* was intended to remind Chinese consumers to beware of tourist traps.

However, in order to be precise and rigorous, this chapter suggests that the *e gao* phenomenon should not be regarded too optimistically. Within *TVoC*'s Baidu Tieba, fans can only repost online video spoofs from licensed audio-video websites such as Souhu, Tudou, and Youku, with their own or other fans' creative video spoofs needing first to be uploaded to licensed audio-video websites. This means that these video spoofs have already been censored and filtered. During the research process, many posts were retrieved when searching for the key words '*e gao*'. However, no content could be seen when they were clicked on. The picture below shows the official explanation of a visit rejection or deleted posts:

> Sorry, the post you visit has been concealed, and temporarily cannot be seen. Posts cannot be seen if user's account is blocked. Hidden message is not deleted and can be seen once the user gets unblock status.

Figure 9. Official explanation of a visit rejection or deleted posts

Such regulations and implemented censorship will only cause more resentment and resistance from Chinese audiences. Disguised in the form of parody, *e gao*

practitioners believed they could circumvented official censorship to speak out the 'truth' and their real opinions. Despite this type of censorship, when presented in the forms of art and fiction online spoofs are more likely to escape political censorship and remain visible online. Pictures and fiction are less easy to detect and therefore less likely to be deleted by regulators such as the *bazhu* of *tieba*. Political resistances have become embedded in fans' creative works, by their use of ironic, subtle, implied and obscure expressions. In summary, *e gao* has provided fans with a creative way to vent social pressures, negative emotions and feelings. Blindly criticising, controlling and restraining the *e gao* phenomenon will not solve the fundamental social-political problems in Chinese society.

8.4 *Tu cao* (fan criticism) as Fan Resistance

It is the *bazhu* of *TVoC*'s Baidu Tieba who have the power to put other fans' posts into certain categories, listing them as 'show-related resources', 'fab pictures', 'music criticism', 'original creation' etc. As the last section examined, some fans' work was sometimes suddenly removed from *tieba* without notice; in contrast, some of their posts were promoted by *bazhu*, highlighted them as 'quality posts' and thus making them more visible to the community.

However, while this promotion system may have helped to encourage fan engagement to some extent, it was not the fundamental motivation for fans to do creative work in the Baidu Tieba space. When fans interactively engaged with *TVoC* (2012) with creative work based on their affective bond between themselves and their fan objects, they used their own language and ways of identifying such work. When fans criticised the show or contestants, they called their work '*tsukkomi*' (吐槽, criticise), meaning they were going to criticise strongly, but also with humour, commenting in a jokey way. *Tsukkomi* originated from the Japanese '突っ込み', meaning to 'butt in' – to criticise in a violent way but also with humour. This principally means to make seemingly

negative comments in a funny way, and is seen as a kind of language art. High quality *tsukkomi* has also been called '神吐槽', meaning to criticise with rich knowledge and a great sense of humour.

Within Baidu Tieba, fans usually use brackets as a format to highlight their posts of *tu cao*. In this way some fans will put '(吐槽)' at the beginning of the post title to indicate the category, the purpose and motivation of a post; others will put '(一起来吐槽)' which means 'to criticise together on something' in order to show collective resistance to regulation and control by *bazhu*, and to the content of *TVoC* (2012). Although the term *tu cao* comes from Japanese anime, comic and games culture it has changed its meaning and been shaped within the context of mainland China to meet the country's unique social and cultural context.

As with *e gao,* the process of searching for the key words '*tu cao'* in *TVoC*'s Baidu Tieba reveals more than 77,249 relevant posts including 1,972 of them with the term '*tu cao'* in their titles. Thus there are almost 100 times as many *tu cao* posts as *e gao* posts. This quantitative data directly reveals the popularity that this other cultural term – *tu cao* – has generated as a subcultural phenomenon in China.

From a grammatical perspective, '*tu cao'* is a noun, however fans generally used it as a verb. They use the verb '*tu cao'* to identify their creative fan works and simultaneously to attract attention from other fans. In this respect, fans interactively engaged with *TVoC* (2012) through creative work based on the affective bond between themselves as fans and their fan objects. Moreover, their *tu cao* practices helped to establish a communication bond among fan communities. When fans criticised the show and wider issues, they identified their work as *tu cao* practices, meaning they were going to criticise and comment in a very strong way, but also with humour.

In a way, *tu cao* are similar to *e gao* (online spoofs) in that they both emphasise the aspect of humour and irony. Originating in Japanese cartoons as a way of describing and exposing unreasonable behaviours or expressions in a

humorous way, *tu cao* is similar to the Japanese term *tsukkomi,* but is not a direct equivalent. The latest edition of the Dictionary of Modern Standard Chinese defines the term '*tu cao*' as 'quick, sharp criticism of dialogue or events that are perceived as violating norms'. To put it more clearly, *tu cao* can be generally and frequently used in situations in which a fault is pointed out directly and without respect but in most cases with a sense of humour. Thus *tu cao* can be understood as 'to tease somebody or something'. For most fans *tu cao* is a way of criticising on the Internet but without using directly violent language. Most *tu cao zhe* (the term refers to people who like to criticise) carry an attitude of ridicule and accusation, but also of humour. They see *tu cao* as satiric and ironic, but harmless.

So far, there have only been a few limited academic studies examining *tu cao* as a cultural phenomenon. And it was not until 2014 that the term *tu cao* was granted admission to the respected realm of official Chinese lexicons, along with another 100 new terms, many of them being slang or online neologisms, such as '*diao si*' (loser), '*shengnü*' (leftover woman), and '*baifumei*' (white, rich and beautiful). The Chinese public gradually accepted these new words which were generated from the Internet in an era of new media, according to a news report by *People.cn* (2014). At present, online *tu cao* has become a new norm in mainland China. Widespread *tu cao* practices on websites such as *Douban, Tianya,* and *Baidu Tieba,* have fostered a large number of cyber language terms, online neologisms and (sub)cultural phenomena.

Professor Wang Fang and Wu Jun (2015) have characterised *tu cao* as an emerging subcultural phenomenon in mainland China, through their exploration and examination of its social significance and subcultural mechanisms. They point out that current Chinese society is in a transition period, which is full of contradictions and problems. Thus *tu cao* as an ironic way of expression allows people to release resulting pressures and vent their frustrations tactfully. They also suggest *tu cao* constitutes both rituals of

199

resistance and expressions of civil discourse power couched in an entertaining way.

Building upon their argument, this chapter suggests that *tu cao* is a popular form of fan practice as collective resistance that has emerged on the Chinese Internet in online fan spaces. The main object of various fan productions with *tu cao* is not mainstream culture but popular culture and is embedded with representative 'commercialisation' and vulgar content. The emergence of this type of resistance can be attributed to the subcultural characteristics and traditions of the Internet's grassroots producers, principally the fans who use it as a forum for communication and creativity.

In the Baidu Tieba of *TVoC (2012)*, user Yi Mi Xing Guang posted on 12 September 2012, appealing to other fans to engage with the *tu cao* of the show. This post then generated 5,269 responses from other fans. Here, fans gathered together, analysing the content and plots from each episode, such as the interactions among the four judges, their conversations, facial expressions, and even semantics. For example, there is a *tu cao* of episode 4 of the first season of *TVoC*, in which one fan describes the plot of the show exaggeratedly, by saying 'Zheng Hong, known as the Chinese Adele, had four judges turned towards her'. The judge Yang Kun made concessions in order to gain this contestant:

> Yang Kun: The way the other three judges are looking at you, suddenly makes me feel they are being very kind to you. Better than I am. So don't choose me today. Even if you choose me, I do not want to train you. Why? Because I saw the sincerity of other judges; they really need you.

> Yu Chengqing being surprised: Yang Kun is so not himself today!

> Yang Kun: Of course I don't mind if you chose me. lol

> Yu Chengqing standing up and shouting: What f*ck! I want to hit you with Jiaduobao (加多宝)! (12 September 2012, Yi Mi Xing Guang)

Another fan then commented and *tu cao*-ed this plot by saying: 'This is a creative product placement! Yu Chengqing did well. But I wonder how much money he took from Jiaduobao'. His words revealed his discontent and obvious

resistance to commercialised and vulgarised mass culture products. Jiaduobao is a herbal drink producer that endorsed *TVoC* (2012) with a ¥60 million (US $9.43 million) sponsorship deal. This sponsorship fee was considered very high compared to other reality programmes in China. Thus, some fans complained about the advertisements and product placement of Jiaduobao in *TVoC* (2012) as being too direct, excessive and appearing too frequently, aspects which widely caused strong dislike and resistance to the brand among fans:

> Wo De Meng 957: I know there will have to be *tu cao* of the advertising of Jiaduobao; tell me I am not the only one (16 August 2012).

> Lan Zhou La Mian: Unable to *tu cao*... the advertising makes me sick (22 August 2012).

> Miss6: (*tu cao*) Please do not insert *The Voice of China* in the ad! (22 August 2012).

> Music er: *TVoC* is China's 'good stories' and China's 'good advertising'. It will receive massive *tu cao* tomorrow (17 September 2012).

The huge commercial success of *TVoC* in 2012 caused general discontent about Canxing Production's excessive promotional processes, including the derivatives of the programme (such as the film adapted from *TVoC* (2012), offline charity events, and other peripheral products). Chinese fans *tu cao*-ing of the content of *TVoC* (2012), its celebrities and contestants, and the advertisements and product placement within it, showed their strong resistance to the Chinese television industry. Examples of fans' tactical resistance can be found within *TVoC*'s *tieba* space, both from their demonstrations of critical attitudes to politically-charged issues of power, ownership, consumption and regulation in China, and from the ways in which they performed and practiced their creativity, by means of *tu cao,* which collectively and tactically resisting certain issues and events.

This thesis does not neglect the significance of creative works from fans as supporters displaying enthusiasm rather than resistance or scepticism. However, the focus of this chapter is on fans' tactical practices within Baidu Tieba. Through the analysis of the *tu cao* phenomenon, this chapter tries to

demonstrate a moment of transition at which the political role of the Internet was expanding. Although the tactics of fans cannot significantly diminish the power of broadcast media, fans can and will continue to fight for their discursive power and free expressions within the Chinese Internet.

Fans' practice of *tu cao* on the Internet has became an important cultural phenomenon in mainland China in recent years, with the new digital environment expanding the scope and reach of fans' activities and forms. *Tu cao* often appears in online spaces, and arises after all kinds of social events. Fans could make individual and collective *tu cao* in a creative and tactical way to resist hegemony and censorship, and the commercialisation of cultural artefacts. Indeed, *tu cao* is not just the embodiment of fan creativity. On other network platforms (such as *Weibo*, *Weixin*, *Douban*, etc), there are also various forms of *tu cao* adopted by Chinese Internet users as forms of tactical resistance to emerging social-cultural events and hegemony (class, cultural, ideology). In the case of *TVoC*'s *tieba*, fans gathered together and engaged with each other within the show's online community. Their creative fan practices mainly focused on two aspects of resistance, one being the over-commercialisation of television programmes and product placement, the other the restrictions of government censorship and monitoring on China's network platforms.

8.5 The political implications of fan creativity

8.5.1 Circumventing censorship

In following the Internet regulations and key documents issuing from the CCP, Baidu Tieba is responsible for what is published on its part of the network. As the previous chapter examined, within *TVoC*'s Baidu Tieba, it is the *bazhu* appointed by Baidu Tieba officials as executive fans who can exercise dominant power over other fans, regulating content and meanings of texts to further control the information flow in this space. This multilayered, self-censoring structure, consisting of fans regulating other fans, is in accordance

with the CCP's response to the challenge of the Internet as a decentralised medium - 'the decentralization of control' (Lin, Tao & Liu, 2003). Technological convergence and the development of the Internet and new media have turned Internet services providers (ISPs) into content controllers, even though they are aware that the communications administration does not monitor them continuously. To avoid causing problems with the regulators, ISPs such as Baidu Tieba censor themselves and have in effect become part of the state's control regime. This situation makes it necessary but difficult to explore political resistance as it emerges in non-conventional formats of fan creativities.

Compared to audiences in the democratic settings of Western countries, Chinese audiences face long-established oppression from a decentralised censorship process which combines coercive measures with self-censorship. Most Chinese audiences/fans feel powerless in their everyday lives, both in online and real spaces, and, as a consequence, they experience difficulties in exerting power in expressing political opinions. Consequently, fans' posts within Baidu Tieba which contain sensitive words will be automatically deleted or will be officially hidden by *bazhu*. Moreover, dissidents may be arrested if they directly take part in political activities that challenge the authority of the government or the CCP. As a previous chapter has examined, Chinese audiences/fans are not allowed to publicly vote for reality shows such as *TVoC* (2012), and those people being too critical about politics in mainland China are widely conceived as being 'in danger'.

Under these circumstances, '*e gao*' and '*tu cao*' both offer Chinese Internet users new popular forms of expression and communication that can undermine state control. As the scholar Meng argues, making fun of the establishment through online spoofs becomes a safer route of communication (Meng, 2011), and an alternative format for conducting political discussions. She also believes that the comic effect produced by *e gao* can have political connotations as 'it satirizes those who possess the power to define the parameters of appropriate forms of speech'. On this point, Meng claims *e gao* is

a stylistic means of 'smuggling ideas past a censor' for Chinese Internet users (Meng, 2011, p. 81). The *tu cao* phenomena can also achieve radical re-interpretation and re-contextualisation of political discourses through integrated multi-media materials. Both the direct control over political discussion and the indirect regulation exercised by ISP's self-regulation will only cause more audiences to resist hegemonic power. However, although these new forms can easily avoid regulation and bypass censors, their very indirectness means that they will not lead to direct change of, or influence over, China's current political environment. At least at present, such forms will not successfully achieve digital democracy (Jenkins, 2006) in China to match Jenkins' example in the US context of popular culture having direct political effects on a presidential election. In fact, the so-called decentralisation of control is not seen as a positive factor but rather as a vicious circle, in that 'decentralization leads to disorder; disorder leads to centralization; centralization leads to stagnation; stagnation leads to decentralization', as Lin, Tao and Liu (2003, p. 11) have argued.

8.5.2 Interactivity: engaging with social issues

At present, China is undergoing a social transition period in which various social contradictions remain unsolved: the imbalance of wealth, environmental concerns, urbanisation, ethnic tensions, corruption, crises of confidence in education and food safety etc. All of these social conflicts cannot be simply resolved in a short period of time. Thus they have caused many Chinese people to feel powerless and confused about their current social status. Online communities such as Baidu Tieba provide fans with a means to express their distrust of the official news media and their discontent with political propaganda. In this way, the role of the Internet and new media goes beyond being a popular tool for expression; by using satire and parody embedded in creative works, fans can aim to engage with social-political issues, to make social comments and to collectively push forward social movements. Participators' discontent and grievance are manifested through a variety of

204

wider critiques about social-political issues. Public discontent and grievance have erupted following some emerging public affairs and media events, and these triggered hidden social conflicts and class contradictions. Hence, tactical resistance arises against the normal status, which is that people in China endure in silence.

Current social issues such as the seemingly irrational rises in house prices, serious air pollution in Beijing, unhealthy food sources, and inequitable educational opportunities, are constantly embedded in the online discourses of fan participation and interactivity. The participation in, and sharing of, fan creativities and activities cultivates decentralised grassroots communities. Through shared interests and common understanding of satires and critical spoofs, emotional bonds have been generated, constructed and disseminated among Chinese fans and wider Chinese Internet users. Fans gather together by making contributions to existing *e gao* and *tu cao* works, through reposts and improvements, enriching not only meaning but also creating collective forces.

Bakhtin's (1984) readings of the 'carnivalesque' allow for a more thoughtful and sensitive understanding of the tactical resistance of Chinese fans reflected in the everyday fan practices of *e gao* and *tu cao* works, and also in other forms. The notion of the 'carnival' and 'carnivalesque' not only permeates reality television but also online participatory culture. According to Bakhtin, carnival/carnivalesque content reconstructs a type of folk humour that challenges the hegemonic hierarchy, through laughter, masks, masquerades, and performance, and that allows for a temporary inversion of the hegemonic hierarchy. In her work on Bakhtin (1984), Meng (2011) has said that 'carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people' as she emphasises links to the participatory nature of medieval carnivals (Meng, p. 47).

Fans disseminate content as tactical resistance in entertaining ways such as *e gao* and *tu cao*. Thus within this ritual form of resistance, fans embrace a festive carnival atmosphere and are released from their institutional constraints.

The effect and influence of such resistance is difficult to measure directly, as there is no direct resolution to current social-political issues. However, what fans can achieve is a symbolic control of discursive power in society, and this enables them to enjoy equality, even though they do not have democratic power. Fans' engagement with social-political issues can invoke common concerns within the people of China which go beyond their private lives and popular cultural consumption.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

9.1 Summary

This study has explored China's media production culture, as well as the media consumption culture of the nation. It has not only engaged with the fields of audience reception studies and television studies, but it also has implications for the wider field of cultural studies. Using Douglas Kellner's (2011) multivalent approaches to culture, this thesis has explored, from the perspectives of political economy, text analysis, and audience reception, how Chinese audiences engaged with the reality television show *TVoC* (2012) through social media platforms. This thesis has been developed through six chapters grouped into three sections, each of which has answered certain aspects of the research questions asked in the introductory chapter. In the first section, the power of government media policies in shaping television industry and media content is highlighted. The political context for understanding how Canxing Production interpreted and implemented SAPPRFT's media polices in the adaptation and localisation process of the imported format of *The Voice* in 2012 has been highlighted, together with a review of how these adaptations and localisations would further influence Chinese audiences' online discussions and activities towards the show.

In the second section, and within this context, this study has explored and discussed the promotional strategies that Canxing Production used to promote *TVoC* in 2012, particularly addressing its Sina Weibo, and has explored the managed promotions and interactive illusions which Canxing Production provided for audiences. Furthermore, these chapters discussed and examined audiences' engagement with *TVoC* (2012) on two social media platforms: Sina Weibo and Baidu Tieba. In doing so, this study has explored Chinese audiences' participation and interactivity with *TVoC* (2012), through their critical, creative and political practices on both platforms. It has also

207

demonstrated how audiences interpreted political regulations and online censorship, and the extent to which they were free to engage with *TVoC* (2012) and practice fandom through social media. Both their engagement and resistance through social media are significant for the understanding of 'interactive television and participatory audiences' in mainland China, as the title of this thesis suggests.

Mixed methods were used to apply three methodological approaches to cultural investigations. Rather than viewing the issues from a single perspective, adopting a historical reception studies method together with online ethnography has allowed this research to look simultaneously at the relationships and the tensions between government media policies, the Chinese television industry, and audience reception. The following sections of this chapter will first summarise the key findings of this study through engagement with existing theory and methods. Then the 'big picture' implications of the relationship between the Chinese television industry, government media policy and Chinese audiences will be reflected upon. Finally, the limitations of this inquiry and suggestions for future research are also presented.

9.2 Key findings

To sum up, within the main relationships outlined, those between government media policy, the television industry and Chinese audiences, the key findings of this research relate to four main aspects: television production companies, SAPPRFT (government censorship), Chinese audiences and the role of social media platforms.

9.2.1 SAPPRFT

This thesis demonstrates that China's television industry has undergone huge transformations since China's entry into the WTO in 2001. Benefiting from cultural globalisation, China's television market was opened up to international businesses and opportunities, and underwent a period of tremendous growth.

However, during this time the media policy of the Chinese government continued to play a crucial role in regulating the Chinese media market as a whole and, more specifically, media content. Although then and now the state advocates a market-economy orientation for the Chinese television industry and media markets generally, concerns about its own legitimacy and ideological dominance remain its first priority.

In order to effectively investigate the Chinese government's regulations and censorship over the media industry and its content, this study has briefly reviewed the history of television in mainland China. This review has looked at both television institutions and television content, and has demonstrated the significant developments and huge transformation of China's television industry and systems from 1958 to the present day. This review demonstrates that over this time the role the party state plays in the Chinese television market remains central and powerful. By studying both the political environment and particular media policies of Chinese television, this thesis has mapped a wide-ranging picture of the complex relationships between the CCP, the government media regulator, television stations, and production companies. It provides significant context for understanding and explaining how the television industry interprets media policies and is subordinated to the state's ideological dominance.

This study has demonstrated that since the nationwide success of *Super Girl* in 2005, the control of the central regulator SAPPRFT (and its predecessor, SAPPRFT) over reality television programmes has become increasingly strict for a wide range of aspects, including content censorship, broadcasting time limits, and even the forms of audience participation allowed. Then two main regulatory media policies (put in place in 2011 and 2013) were particularly addressed, in order to analyse how SAPPRFT has attempted to curtail and control the Chinese television market with regard to imported foreign television formats. In doing so, this thesis highlights the most significant contextual issues for the importation, production and broadcasting of *TVoC* in 2012.

9.2.2 Television production companies

In China's media market, the television industry has undergone a transformation as, under the influence of media globalisation, it has became both transmedia and transnational in character. International television formats and content flow into China, and these inevitably influence the Chinese media market and shape online participatory culture in China.

Despite media regulations and censorship, reality television is booming in mainland China, particularly since 2012. The popularity of reality television programmes in China has led to some industrial and academic exploration and discussion of the reasons for it. In regard to Canxing Production's promotional strategies for *TVoC* in 2012, this study has highlighted the popularity and unprecedented success of the show, as well as two major issues caused by it. First, *TVoC* (2012)'s success encouraged an industry-wide importation of foreign television formats; it also generated massive audience engagement with such formats through social media platforms. The analysis of the Chinese television industry in Chapters 1 and 2 contributes to the current debates in China about the success of *TVoC*. The commercial success of *TVoC* has propelled Chinese TV show producers, from traditional broadcasters to video sites, to pursue and produce highly-rated shows that use well-established foreign TV show formats.

On the one hand, this thesis demonstrates the importance of television formats which are already successful in other countries, as they can facilitate the standardisation and quality of content between China and the rest of the world. It agrees with Waisbord's (2004) point about global television formats providing new possibilities for cultural hybridisation within global TV exchanges. Thus, for most production companies in China, successful television formats offer the chance for domestic TV networks to achieve good audience ratings with lower costs and risk. Nevertheless, this study also challenges some scholars (Wang, 2013; Yu, 2012; Liang, 2012) who have argued that using an

imported successful foreign television format can secure the success of a reality show in China.

It also suggests that in practice it is not necessarily easier for local producers to localise TV formats than it is to produce new/original shows, thus taking a different view from Waisbord's (2004) observation. To summarise, this thesis has argued that although production companies can benefit from using mature television formats which have already been successful elsewhere in the world, the localisation process for such foreign formats has been influenced heavily by the Chinese government's media policies. The promotional strategies as explored in Chapter 2 and the managed interactions in the Weibosphere as discussed in Chapter 3 both demonstrate Canxing Production's ideological interpretations, adaptation and implementation of government media policies. It has been seen that it is crucial for television producers to consciously apply political awareness while they localise television formats and content.

To further evidence this argument, this study examines the wider scope of the institutional system of China's television stations, and the power relationships between the state-owned broadcasters and private production companies. In particular, in the Introduction and Chapter 1, it addresses STVPB policy. This thesis demonstrates the links between the development of Chinese television industry and media policies, and suggests that the STVPB policy opens up opportunities for independent production companies and the penetration of global trade in cultural products in China. Although private ownership of television channels is still prohibited in China, the implementation of STVPB policy enlarges the possibilities for the importation of foreign television formats. In addition, this study reflects on the extent to which the Chinese television industry relies on government media policies, and production companies rely on the broadcasters.

9.2.3 Social media

With regard to the success of *TVoC* in 2012, the second important debate is about the use of social media by the television industry as a promotional strategy. Significantly, this thesis has found that Chinese audiences cannot vote in reality television programmes. Consequently, Canxing Production had to interpret SAPPRFT's updated regulations in this regard during the format localisation process. It also cooperated with a state-owned TV station (Zhejiang TV), sharing risks and revenues, and working together to steer and manipulate audience participation in the light of the ban on voting by audiences. As addressed many times in this thesis, SAPPRFT has authority over guiding the television industry's operations and business imperatives in China. In its location between government regulations and audiences' needs, this study has found that Canxing Production turned to providing its audiences with key factors such as 'dream-fulfilment' and 'democracy' by offering participatory/interactive opportunities through social media platforms. This finding engages with Jian and Liu's (2009) exploration of fan voting in *Super Girl*, where they argue that, paradoxically, unpaid labour performed by fans delivers a promise of audience agency. Jian and Liu's study highlights the ways production companies steer and manipulate audience's participation.

Likewise, in terms of industry strategies, this thesis addresses Canxing Production's promotional strategies for *TVoC* (2012) through which it intended to encourage media convergence and audience participation by tapping into the interactive potential of digital technology. Chapter 2 analyses the participatory/interactive opportunities embedded within the weekly narrative of the first episode of the first season of *TVoC*. Through this analysis, it is argued that the Chinese television industry largely sold an illusion of 'interactive opportunities' to audiences to get the show promoted and to achieve high audience ratings. In doing so, Canxing Production mixed up the two terms/concepts of 'participation' and 'interactivity'.

This study argues that the term 'interactivity' has become an important term and concept in the Chinese television industry which implies the passing of power to audiences. This point has engaged with Marshall's (2004) definition of 'interactivity', which states that it has been overused by the new media industries in order to sell the distinctiveness and value of their new technologies, to the point where interactivity seems to represent little more than 'hyperbole, hucksterism and hype'. In addition, this thesis has also found that the Chinese television industry only offers Chinese audiences a 'vision' of participation, rather than the real power proclaimed as being provided by the industry itself. Chinese audiences had no direct interactive power, as their engagement could not be woven into the narrative and content of *TVoC* (2012). Therefore, this study has reflected and engaged with Jenkins' (2004) argument in which the author states that all interactivities offer participation, but that not all participation can be interactive.

From 2005 to 2009, reality shows in China mainly provided audiences with 'interactivity' through text messaging, the conventional telephone, and online forums. Nowadays, the term 'interactivity' used by the industry largely refers to the use of social media platforms such as Sina Weibo (microblog). Social media in China, such as bulletin board systems, social networking sites, blogs, and microblogs, have offered numerous channels and various platforms for Chinese audiences to participate in cultural practices in pursuit of all kinds of fan objects (Zhang and Mao, 2013). Among these platforms, social networking sites are the most popular, and often contain the most audience engagement with television programmes. As demonstrated, the social media platform Sina Weibo played a significant role in promoting *TVoC* (2012). This exploration provides a potentially significant development in our understanding of audiences and their relationship with media (Deller, 2010), and of the convergence between old and new media and between producers and consumers (Jenkins, 2006). This study has found that almost all reality television programmes in China now operate at least one official microblog

account, as a complementary way of spreading programme information, and bridging audience communication and participation with the show.

9.2.4 The value of audiences' engagement

In analysing audience engagement on two social media platforms, this thesis argues that audience discussions and practices on Baidu Tieba (non-official space) are to some extent different from the ones appearing on Sina Weibo (official space). For many Chinese audiences, the particular characteristics of social media platforms greatly determine the ways in which audiences respond to and engage with television programmes. As this thesis suggests, the boundary between 'general audiences' and 'active fans' is becoming blurred. It is not the aim of this study to define and distinguish fans from audiences, or to clarify a centralised or dominant culture as against subcultures within Chinese society. Such research would, in fact, be useful in investigating how audiences identify their own uses of social media. The official Sina Weibo site for *TVoC* (2012) offered Chinese audiences a platform to share their evaluations of the show and its actors (judges), their expressions of fandom and their critiques of the contestants.

In addition, Canxing Production used the Weibo site to build communications and interactions with celebrities, which together provided audiences with the illusion of getting close to celebrities. Focusing upon specific celebrities' Weibo accounts, their followers and *TVoC* (2012)'s Weibo, this study analyses the emerging hierarchies of power relations among those groups. It demonstrates that celebrity accounts play a crucial role in generating more audiences and fans, as they are powerful in influencing options and discussions within the Weibosphere. The complicated interplay between audiences/consumers and Canxing Production reflects the value of audience engagement to television industry. The interaction between audiences and television now matters greatly to China's television industry, taking over from audience ratings, which were formerly the key focus of the measurement of success within the industry.

Accordingly, through analysis of how the ideas of power and hierarchy are imbedded into the *TVoC* (2012) fan community online at Baidu Tieba, Chapter 5 demonstrates that Baidu Tieba is a different type of social media space, with different ways of constructing hierarchy and community. Fans of *TVoC* (2012) were caught between the industry and its promoters, and the online regulation of the community. They did not only 'sample dialogue, summarise episodes, debate subtexts, create original fan fiction, record their own soundtracks, make their own movies and distribute all of this worldwide via the internet' (Jenkins, 2004: p. 34), but furthermore they sought ways to break and challenging the 'rules' and the hierarchy, by expressing and discussing their discontented and resistive receptions with others, by appealing to be fairly treated within the community, reporting, and by complaining about others' potentially harmful posts and requiring them to be removed.

This research also demonstrates the similarities between audience engagements on both platforms. Chapter 4 analyses the emergence of multiple critical voices within the Weibosphere, spreading and helping to generate new kinds of audience engagement with *TVoC* (2012). And in Chapter 6, this thesis analyses the ways in which fans are being creative by using ironic criticism in resistance to online censorship on *TVoC* (2012)'s Baidu Tieba. In order to avoid political censorship while at the same time expressively participating, Chinese audiences became more creative and active in engaging with popular cultural artefacts. This thesis suggests that the active engagement of Chinese audiences/fans can be read as grassroots resistance and 'tactical responses' and that such resistance can be achieved through different practices depending on the platforms being used. Fans are not only spurring a deeper appreciation of the original text, but are also using knowledge and criticism in an effort to challenge existing authority. In other words, this study illustrates that online censorship in China shapes audiences' online participation and interactivity through social media.

Therefore, the value of audiences' online engagement with *TVoC* (2012) as discussed in sections two and three, opens up the potential for the wider application of De Certeau and Jenkins' views on fans and audiences. In seeing Chinese audiences' engagement with television programmes as a social participation phenomena, this study addresses debates about audiences' agencies and power with regard to the specific political economy context of mainland China. Audiences' critical online discussions and creative labour can be seen as a form of social-political participation, in which individual audience members or fans become more active agents who contribute to discussion and reflection on social issues in mainland China.

To sum up, by tracing back to the historical moment and events around *TVoC* in 2012, this thesis has found that Internet technologies and social media enabled and stimulated important individual critical thinking and creativities which could be used against structural constraints such as censorship and commercialisation in recent China. Although no direct political participation was allowed within China's cyberspace, Chinese audiences expressed and negotiated power in their own ways that will help to construct political value in China.

9.2.5 Localisation/globalisation of television formats

In the past four years there has been further progress in the issues of global format trading, which have also proved and extended these research findings and research frameworks. Canxing Production and the Dutch media entity, Talpa, failed to agree on the conditions of a renewal contract before the previous contract ended in 2016. This conflict between the two companies provides a good case for discussing global format copyrights which deserves investigation in future studies. Back in 2012, Canxing Production paid more than ¥2 million ($300,000) in license fees to Talpa to obtain the format for *TVoC*. However, according to Canxing Production, in 2016 the Talpa demanded a license fee that was 'more than a hundred times' its initial price of four years earlier (China Real Time Report, 2016). Consequently, Canxing

Production refused to pay for the license renewal, which had risen to ¥60 million. Together with the provincial broadcaster, Zhejiang Satellite Station, Canxing holds the right to use the Chinese name of 中国新歌声 for the fifth season of *TVoC*, also known as *Sing China*. In comparison with the TVoC (2012) format, it can be seen that the all-new *Sing China* show has partially changed the original format to avoid copyright issues. For instance, the new show features sliding rollercoasters as judge's chairs instead of using the famous red spinning chairs.

The issue which must be addressed here is the influence of the new show on the official Sina Weibo account of *TVoC* (2012). Canxing Production created a new Sina Weibo site for *Sing China* in 2016, with the previous one for *TVoC* being removed. This did not impact on the data collection and analysis for this research, as it had already be done before this happened. However, this issue demonstrates the uncertainty and ambiguity around the future development of reality television in China. This means that attention must continue to be paid to the ongoing transformation of the Chinese television industry. Under continuing cultural globalisation and media convergence, the specific media market in China engages with new questions and debates that are worthy of further exploration, and such issues will contribute to the global study of television-format trading, reality television and convergence culture.

9.3 The 'big picture': Implications and contributions

Current audience studies and fan theories are often Western-centric, and optimistic about the power and agency of audiences and fans in a democratic society and relatively free-speech environments, as introduced in Chapter 1. By presenting an exploration into the specific context of mainland China, this thesis provides a more comprehensive view from which to understand the theory of online participatory culture. Exploration of audience engagement with cultural artefacts within a non-Western political context has therefore

challenged most of the Western-centric audience/fan studies and theories. It does not negate the rising power of audiences as they archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content, in which tasks they are enabled by the explosion of new media technologies. The Internet, with its technological advantages, has indeed given audiences and fans more opportunities to participate and interact with cultural artefacts. But the restrictions and regulations of media content imposed by SAPPRFT in China demonstrate a different picture from those seen in Western-centric audience studies and fan theories.

This thesis also contributes to the understanding of the politics of reality television in China. From both the textual and contextual levels, this thesis has found that *TVoC* (2012) presents strong political implications and meanings. For instance, this study discusses the myth surrounding the winning song '*I love you China*' (sung by Liang Bo) in the final show of *TVoC* (2012), and has explored the compulsory charity events that contestants were required to attend.

There was clear political propaganda impact on the content of the programme. This study analyses two main regulatory media policies imposed in 2011 and 2013, and indicates that SAPPRFT has imposed strict regulations on television programming since the broadcasting of *TVoC* in 2012. It is also worth noting that in 2015 SAPPRFT further strengthened its regulations on the television industry, with additional policy directives relating to foreign film and television content, including specific limitations on when and how often foreign and foreign-format shows could air on television and on streaming sites, and even imposing specific limitations on singing competition programmes.

Following the growing popularity of reality television in China, SAPPRFT recently imposed new regulations specifically addressed towards reality television shows. On 22 July 2015, SAPPRFT issued a new 'notice' strengthening the management of reality shows. The key points of this most recent directive require that reality television shows in China should:

- avoid excessive stardom
- repel vulgar and excessive entertainment, and low taste
- deliver 'socialist core values'
- transmit 'positive energy' and have a 'positive educational purpose'
- carry 'Chinese dream' themes as well as patriotism and Chinese traditions
- promote innovation and originality in reality shows
- indicate the producers' confidence in China's own culture and create original insights into TV programme planning.

In this 'notice', SAPPRFT did not mention specific shows that were good or bad examples of acceptable reality television programming. Rather, it set up a main theme and standard for the whole of Chinese reality television. Reality television shows in most Western countries star actors, sportspeople and other celebrities, who appear more concerned with showing off their personal achievements (Chin, 2016) than expressing core moral values. In contrast, this particular policy shows the intentions of the Chinese media regulator to firmly embed the CCP's political ideologies into media content. For instance, 'avoid excessive stardom' essentially demonstrates a perception of the appearance of capitalism in a socialist country. In the industry, a popular star's income might be much higher than average wage earnings, and this does not conform with the spirit of frugality advocated by the Chinese government. Such capitalistic manifestations are considered by policy makers to be inappropriate in such shows. Also, the government repels vulgar and excessive entertainment, and low taste, which reflects government control of current cultural phenomena in China. The government will introduce control measures whenever any kind of cultural phenomenon tends to be over-popular.

The previous two points reveal those features which the government does not want to see. On the other hand, government does hope that reality television content could play an important part in educating people. Under the big theme of 'Chinese dream', the Chinese government wants the television industry to embed notions of patriotism and socialist core values in television content to achieve a positive educational impact on the Chinese people. The

government's emphasis on the originality of reality television necessarily resists imported foreign television formats in order to promote China's own culture in an isolated media market.

Viewing China's media market as an isolated one is an accurate position, because media content has been strictly controlled by the imposition of 'right' political ideologies. The success of the reality television market for imported television formats has led to the development and innovation of China's television industry, and has helped it to keep up with international trends at the economic level. Nevertheless, at the textual level, the content of reality television remains 'national' and with 'socialist core values', as dictated by government propaganda.

China's entry into the WTO has opened up the TV market in the country, but only to a small degree. Tight censorship regulation by SAPPRFT limits the entry of foreign players, especially from Western countries. Foreign players are restricted in terms of foreign investment, as China's television market is still dominated by state-owned television stations. At present, it is difficult for foreign television programmes to directly penetrate into mainland China, and this is another reason why a successful foreign television format can be popular in the Chinese television market.

For decades, Chinese TV was dominated by programming designed to dispense socialist wisdom to the masses. But with China's market economy reforms, diverse culture and cultural products have flourished on the airwaves. In consequence, with regard to the future of the media, foreign ideologies that carry over into mainland China are the biggest threat and concern to the CCP. The popularity of reality television shows in China seems not to be decreasing, even at this uncertain moment of CCP leadership transition and strict media content control. New government media policies and regulations are emerging which intensify media market competition in this country. It is to early yet to judge whether strict media policy will harm or limit

the development of the Chinese television industry. What is certain is that it has influenced and shaped Chinese audiences' online participatory culture.

9.4 Conclusion

The great success of *TVoC* (2012) was a result of the rapid changes that had been taking place in China's government policies, the television industry, new media production and social media. *TVoC* (2012) is not only a case of a successful reality television programme, but it has generated a cultural phenomenon. In conclusion, this thesis seeks to emphasise again the importance of taking multivalent approaches to exploring new cultural phenomena in China, by examining them from the perspectives of political economy, text and audience reception. Specifically in the context of mainland China, in order to understand reality television and its audiences, the tensions and power relationships between government media policies, the television industry and Chinese audiences should not be neglected. Addressing these issues from a single perspective, either through textual analysis, audience reception studies or industrial analysis, is not comprehensive enough to provide an insight into participatory culture in China.

This thesis does not suggest that a single methodology is not important in general, but it posits that it is unlikely to provide an accurate exploration of *TVoC* (2012), involving as it does various key elements which need to be addressed: the transformation of the Chinese television market, the Chinese government's media policies and regulations, global television-format trading, cultural globalisation, social media, Internet censorship in China, media convergence and online participatory culture. By taking a multivalent approach, I hope that this thesis contributes to current debates in the international research fields of reality television, audience reception, and studies of contemporary popular culture in mainland China, as well as offering methodological direction for further studies of similar cases and cultural phenomena.

Further research focuses can be expand upon this thesis because this research has only explored Chinese audiences' engagement through two major social media platforms. As new media and technology progresses, it will be interesting to see how Chinese audience's engagements with reality television may shift to reflect the new spaces in which they use. Other online spaces such as *Tianya* (天涯) and *Jingjiang* (晋江), as well as various online subcultural communities, would also be of great interest in such explorations.

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Appendix: Ethical approval from GREC

Xin Yao
School of Film, Television and Media Studies
UEA

30th June 2014

Dear Xin,

I am writing to you on behalf of Professor Peter Kitson, Chair of the General Research Ethics Committee, in response to your submission of an application for ethical approval for your study 'From 'Super Girl' to 'The Voice of China': the rise of the interactive television audiences in Mainland China?'.

Having considered the information that you have provided in your correspondence Professor Kitson has asked me to tell you that your study has been approved on behalf of the Committee.

You should let us know if there are any significant changes to the proposal which raise any further ethical issues.

Please let us have a brief final report to confirm the research has been completed.

Yours sincerely

Tasha McGowan
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